

Death Magic 691

Chapter 691: True Demonlord [22]

'Jula Valentino and Odgar Codd,' legs crossed, elbow to the armrest, and a somewhat sympathetic frown. Prior decision to bravely stroll into the manor felt unnerving. The lady, bare acquaintances, took notice of the area and watched fondly. Midway along with the silence, the door opened to show a timid Vanesa and teddy in her little hands. Carefree to the visitors, a gesture invited the girl onto the two-seated sofa, the melancholically colored complexion slept on his legs as a pillow. The oiliness of her hair made it warm to the touch, father to the troublemaker, he sat and smiled.

"I apologize for the lateness," intruded éclair, "-I've brought a transcript of the interrogation. There's the video about the attack. I'll leave matters in the master's hand," and so, he left after a somewhat irritated expression from the guests. Midne, shy of the outwardly opened door, barely missed the edge. A glance snuck to be rudely blocked, "-no peeping," he reprimanded," a veil of mystery robed the study.

"éclair, will the master be ok?"

"Good," he smiled, "-I see care and affection for the master. Very good, I say, the first challenge in being a maid is cleared. Please realize, our master isn't weak nor is he daft. Follow me, we'll get dinner ready; a lot has happened ever since he reawakened. Can't believe it's only been a day; goes to show, time is very subjective, to which I wonder if a person can completely halt the flow."

"The master can," returned Midne.

"Sorry?" he turned.

"N-no, nothing."

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"Please," he pushed up her chin, "-stand straight, look at me, and drop the habit of staring at the floor. Confidence is mostly body posture and mannerism; we'll work on it slowly. Accept who you are, and be proud, tis the first step."

"T-thank you."

Vanesa's idyllic expression nearly dulled the room's feel. A slight shuffle of papers focused ire and distraught. "-this is..."

"Yes, Odgar, anything to say?"

"-M-Master, I do beg your pardon; the interrogation went smoothly, I'm confused as to how..."

"Honesty my friend. The man was a pawn, and pawn needs not loyalty – survival is what brings home fame and fortune, not being loyal. Then again, I don't condone turn-coats, they deserve to be killed. How would you react before the slaughter of highly trained insurgents? If the attacker offers kindness, take it. Accept the terms and don't lose the self-respect one has, the moment the options cross the line, fight or die."

"A very ambiguous and vague answer," commented Jula.

“-Same could be said about the nature of the attack,” he frowned, “-tell me, chief of police, how do you know Odgar, rather, how do you know where I live?”

“I don’t appreciate the tone, lord viscount.”

“Alas, my lady,” it harshened, “-who in the right frame of mind would entertain the one who, knowing or not, played a part in one home’s devastation. Kindness has its limits, and mine’s about ran thin. I admit, I might have bit more than I can chew,” he resettled and caressed Vanesa’s hair, “-I bit, therefore, I’ll swallow the remnants. What about you, why does the chief need be here?”

“I-”

“No,” said Odgar, “-allow me to explain,” he softly turned, her eyes fluttered and stared away, “-my lord Igna, I’ve come to remedy the incident. éclair was very vocal in the message. I never expected them to make a move, and here we are, I thought the manor be destroyed.”

“Evidently, you thought wrong. There were casualties, and I’m happy to say, they all rot in a pit of hell.”

“You killed the insurgence?”

“Yes,” returned he vehemently, “-Lady Jula, tell me, what is law, what is righteous, where is the line to define good from evil. You represent what the people must aspire to, how lawful art thee?”

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“I don’t know really. Good and evil, the answers have been left in the god’s laps ever since I was little. Law citizens must abide serve to benefit the minority of the rich and powerful; the commoners are somewhat protected in said circle. In fairness, things that make one’s heart tremor in guilt is bad.”

“What about an emotionless killer, the man feels no guilt in slaughter. The answer was very subjective and simple.”

“And, what’s your definition of it?”

“Good and evil in of itself are flawed, a misconception created for fear-mongering. Everyone who acts in their mind think it be the right choice. Therefore, the word good and evil isn’t necessary. When a man donates to a starved man, he’s hailed as a good person. In the same situation, change the words ‘donates’ to employs, and starved man to ‘slave’. What then, is the employer evil? So you see, chief of Ogdawoan, there is truth in thy words, God holds the answer. Enough of idealism, a practical answer would be to judge each and all equally, find the middle ground between the virtuous and lamented, then again, the powerful will always win the outcome. An equal society will never exist, those who are harmed will be harmed until they take up arms. I say, an eye for an eye until the world is blind; only then, with the ability to not see, will it be equal.”

“Very morbid,” her forehead crinkled, “-when all will be blind, you mean dead?”

“Yeah, equality already exists, and tis the nature. Consciousness is what brought about those words.”

“Not to interrupt the deep conversation, however, master, the speech felt more along the lines of what a villain would say.”

“Who knows,” he shrugged in jest, “-maybe I am the villain or simply another organism in the vastness of the world. Back to the question, lady Jula, the withheld anger won’t help – speak thy mind, I’ll allow it.”

“Oh,” her fist clenched, “-you’ll allow it...”

“Calm down,” whispered Odgar, “-don’t blow your load.”

“Listen,” he ignored her emotions, “-if it’s about the massacre, then it couldn’t have been avoided. I killed them mercilessly. I allowed a single person to escape, he should have fled the continent by now. Let’s get to the heart of the matter,” the inattentive air swallowed into an intense expression, “-how deep is the underworld in the matter of public safety.”

“Huh?” her mouth opened in bafflement, “-how did.”

“Oh, don’t give me the innocent act. I know all about the black economy, the money granted by the state isn’t sufficient to finance military affairs, nor is it for law and safety. Most of the budget goes to the former, and the latter is left with naught but trinkets. Alpha’s seriousness on narcotics; more of the reason why the market is bountiful. I won’t deny my ties to the underworld of Hidros. Alpha’s judiciary system will be damned to lay a hand on me, or any of my comrades.”

“Are you arrogant or confident, I don’t get it.”

“Whatever you think isn’t the matter. Tell me, Chief Jula, were you involved in the attack?”

“No, I came here because of what Odgar relayed. As I see it, the operation was done independently,” her gaze scattered into the distance, “-I won’t be ignorant and say the police isn’t corrupted. I personally am not afflicted to the underworld. There was another for the position, a man of great influence, I’m very shocked as to why I was promoted.”

“Simple,” said Odgar, “-look before you.”

“There are many ways to sway judgment. To win against a greater power, one must accomplish deeds even greater and don’t forget, you’ve accomplished tasks normal folks could only ever hope to dream about. In a way, I did play into the whole circus and made thee the focus of attention, the heroine of the dreaded terrorist attack.”

“You give me far too much credit.”

“And perhaps it’s for the better,” he paused, “-truth be told, my actions were in part for Odgar. Don’t misunderstand,” he slyly rose a brow, “-the exchange of glances was very affectionate. Companionship is nice, I wish thee well for the future.”

Knock, knock,

“-enter.”

“Pardon me master, dinner’s ready.”

“Very well,” he gently tapped Vanesa, “-wake up, food is ready,” swift to the guests, “-join us as well, we have much to discuss.” The lady asked for the washroom, Midne responded to the request, éclair happily took Vanesa – Igna and Odgar were left alone.

“What’s the end objective?”

“Pardon me?”

“Come on, Odgar, I know you’re not the type of person to bring an important figure for pleasantries. Besides, what of the Kion and the rest, are they well?”

“Still thinking of the team...” he stopped to a lonesome window, “-they’re well, the laxness of not paying rent is amazing. The job’s less stressful; Inesa returned recently, Kion’s been taking care of her, she’s traumatized, the mental scar is far worse. I decided for all to have a break, a month to relax, Tensy, and the bunch flew home to spend the rare time. I heard Aki’s wife expects a child, and Camilia, well, her family ran into some inheritance issues.”

“Do you ever wonder about other people,” he joined Odgar’s simple outside glance, “-everyone has their dreams and aspiration. They’re the main character of their story and not just the side characters of ours.”

“I never saw it that way.”

“About the attack, don’t worry, we handled it.”

“Honestly, I came here without a purpose. Jula proposed we spent time and share an apartment, figured why not, tis when éclair sent the message. I was scared for the land; from what I’ve seen, if you’re to let loose, the damages could never be fixed.”

“I see,” he chuckled, “-we may stand here and laugh, a real threat looms over the horizon. I checked the news earlier; the northern part of town has been strictly quarantine.”

“The plague of monsters has badly affected the vigilantes. I heard the AHA don’t want to risk any more of their heroes. Instead, they’ve hired mercenaries to guard the front.”

“The AHA is still a shitshow, pardon the language.”

“I agree, they’re worthless and care for-profit and public image. Still think it’s better than before, the old hierarchy was a mess.”

“Yeah, I know,” he smiled, “-Emi Muko and her sisters, I know the story all too well.”

“The death of Luna and the Jester, the brother to Asuna Mold, the true heroine who died by the oppression from the AHA, or so I’ve heard. It happened close to a decade ago, time passes by quickly, back then, things were nice – ever since then, the emperor hasn’t decreed anything close to what was said. The culling of the AHA, look now, the latter is baseless and fragile; the heroes are only chosen from the elite. Sorry, I went off on a tangent.”

“I’m surprised the story is still known.”

“Are you serious, have you not seen the movie?”

“What movie?”

“Luna and the Jester? It’s a fictional retelling of the events till the fall of the AHA. Tis one of the highest-grossing movies to be produced; I’m surprised thee haven’t seen the legacy.”

“Oh, a movie, bad reputation for the AHA.”

“No, actually, it was financed by them in good faith. They wanted to do the hero and heroine justice and expose the real truth. An investigator came forward with insider information. You must watch it.”

“I will. We should have dinner; time waits for none.”

“I have to ask,” they stood in the lift, “-what is the plan forward, what about Jula?”

“If the lady wishes to keep her standing as Chief, she’ll need to ally to the underworld sooner or later. Tis a task for her lover, birth the idea; don’t worry about lying, say the truth and take the attack as an example.”

“Sure... I’ll leave the rest...”

‘And if I’ve played my hands correctly; she should be confused – we started strong and were interrupted perfectly as I gave compliments. A single look speaks of her mental fatigue. Odgar, you’re a great pawn; Luon will back the chief, an easy way to skyrocket for the top. Even if it fails, I’ll make her see my way for they are in my castle. I do sound like a villain.’

“Master, why such an ominous grin?”

“Ignore it.”

Chapter 692: True Demonlord [23]

Dinner lasted shy of an hour, around said time, Asmodeus and Kul would be on their way home. Vanesa did as she always did, swallowed the food at a rapid pace. Odgar and Jula were left wondering how a petite body could fit such an amount. The pacing worked in Igna’s favor, soon, they would return to the study. Stuffed stomachs and a sleepy undertone, the seating arrangements remained the same in exception of Igna, who sat a little further from the chief. In time, the distance would grow on his command.

“Chief Rozemal, do you know anything about D’Loa and Konpth?”

“Families of great prominence, why, what’s the matter?”

“How big of a scandal would it be if the D’Loa name was caught in dubious activities?”

“I imagine the government would be terrified, why, is something the matter?”

“Zer D’Loa was the captive I questioned, he was sent on orders from the Patek Dynasty,” her demeanor changed, “-by the look you gave, am I to assume this is bad?”

“Tis big as it gets. I’m doubtful the dynasty would be so carefree.”

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“I know,” he smiled, “-which is why I needed to test the waters. The culprits are known. Zer is bait – whoever used him will assume the worst, by which it means, the man must have spoken the truth. If he were found dead in the next few days... I wonder.”

“Seriously viscount, how could you?”

“I never said mercy is free,” he shrugged, “-hence we come to the end of this conversation. If my hunch is right, your actions in the past few weeks have been to hamper the underworld; bad move, very bad move. The weight of your family name has slowed any malicious conspiracies; I find it funny how a terrorist attack would occur around the same time you transfer and was in the process of election, very suspicious. The five conglomerates are at war, the unity has fallen in view of Lum’s downfall. We stand before a crossroad, rather, you stand before it. Choose lawfulness and combat the vileness of the world. There I dare warn such a fight to be akin to an unarmored fight against a hydra. The second option, ally yourself to a bigger party, fastened thy claim on the throne, and slowly clean the sludge from the top down. The matter is in thy hands.”

‘I hate it,’ she thought heavily, ‘-he’s seen through me, my expression must have changed subconsciously. So much for the fa?ade. I really hope this day would never come, father did warn about the state of this town, the underworld rules all. Law enforcement is there to protect the people from themselves, if the mafia wishes to kill, we can’t act, even if we have a right to. Lee’s been torn, the moment my guard is dropped, he’ll take the post. I need to fortify my name, but how...’

“Why not ally to us?” suggested Igna.

“Are you reading my thoughts?” escaped her parched lips.

“No, I only assumed what thee might have been thinking. Say, Chief of Odgawoan, why haven’t you joined a family?”

“Because of my father.”

“How’s the general related to this town?”

“Not much, I promised him I’d become someone who he would be proud of. The stigma of a lady in the police force, let alone the army, is hard to shake. Discrimination is rampant, merit is close to nonexistent. I despise the world where my worth is judged by what I have in my pants. The climb here wasn’t easy, rumors of me sleeping around to be strong have spread, I can’t help what people think or say.”

“I understand, the stigma associated by one’s gender,” he paused and faced a bookshelf, “-Alpha’s littered by it. Everyone’s equal, or so they preach – politics is a big game of make-believe. What you wish, a world where women are treated equally already exists back home. Our country is ruled by a very strong queen, she’s one of the best people I’ve ever met. My mother is a queen of the newly established Arda, she’s firm, a little on the eccentric side but very loveable. Next, my aunt, Lady Courtney, the director of Phantom, a mastermind and genius when it comes to business, her foresight into the market has never been rivaled, I’m an ant compared to her. My closest allies are strong dignified women to whom I give my utmost respect. The list goes on and on. In no way do I discredit men, they’re worth their weight when the correct person is scouted.”

“Really, I never once thought of the outside world.”

“-You should, the constriction of this continent is subjective, decide thy path, and act according to thy will.”

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Her fingers softly tapped; the mannerism shifted into an open stance. Each time Igna spoke, Odgar nodded affirmingly. He who she trusted so much was pleased, and in doing so, the subconscious barrier eased for more ‘preposterous’ ideas, “-and how, I still don’t know how?”

“Join Phantom.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said, join the Elon Dynasty and Phantom alliance. Here’s a little bit of insider information, Amsey of Lum is currently negotiating his way to return to the world of show business. The vacancy left by the departure’s been abused. The Gaso group’s relentless. A bigger problem, the monster curse, has slowed their progress.”

“Alright, if I join Phantom, what will it entail?”

“I don’t know, it will depend on how my aunt decides to welcome. One thing is for certain, once a member, there won’t be the reason to worry about losing thy reputation or seat, I will make sure it won’t happen, personally.”

“-And in return?”

“For Raven’s activities to be ignored, the Anti-Narco Unit’s been too involved lately.”

“Are you selling narcotics?”

“What would give you that idea?” he leaned forward and unholstered Tharis, “-the underworld is a taboo subject. Those unknown to the ways of the underworld will be killed regardless of their rank. My wish isn’t to force a decision,” *Come forth, Vengeance,* a blurred figure leaped to tightly grip her neck, “-Chief of Odgawoan,” a burning sensation reddened her cheeks and neck, “-I’ve engraved a curse of silence, speak any of this to another, the result won’t be pretty.”

“Viscount...” she glanced up to a terrifying presence, “-what is the meaning of this?”

“Insurance,” the spirit returned, “-what fool of a man would allow critical information to escape.”

A look to Odgar, ‘-don’t tell me,’ her heart sank.

“I apologize,” he bowed, “-I can’t speak of the reason, not as long as you’re an outsider.”

“Odgar, I’m your damned lover...”

“I know, I adore you, nothing will ever sway my feelings,” the hands tightened, “-emotions alone won’t bring food on the table, nor will it realize our goal.”

“Igna Haggard,” her tone sharpened, ‘-I made a mistake and he capitalized on it. The fault is completely mine, I dug too deep. If this had been a meeting between mafia and police, I’d have been shot.’

“Lady Rozemal, why think so hard. Join me, join us, join the family,” he proclaimed with open arms, “-why reject the unknown, take the plunge and sink into the world of despair. To protect, one must surrender. Give and take, my friend, give and take. Tis how the world has been made to be. I’ve given options; choose well. On one side stands a familiar land and backstabbing allies, and enemies, on the other stands a free land, where thy lover and his companions have already set their flags. Will thee cross the ocean to the new land or remain still, bound by the growing pressure of expectations?”

“Quite the dramatics, I made my decision before arriving,” her aura swapped for one of integrity, “-my name’s Jula Valentino Rozemal, the Chief of Odgawoan. I knew of the attack on the manor, frankly, I knew about Patek’s involvement. The attack targeted me; when you’re faced by backstabbers, the skill to spot fakeness and genuine concern becomes an integral part for survival, I’m a cynic, no more no less,” she held Odgar’s hands.

“I see,” came a chuckle, “-the chief was performing her test, might I inquire about the results?”

“Under normal circumstances, I’d have rejected the proposition. Everyone has been trying to take advantage of my standing, they’ve tried to get in my good graces for selfish gains. There was never props for me to take advantage of,” her righteous face slipped into a conniving sneer, “-I’m tired of it all,” she untied her hair and dropped onto the sofa.

“Jula Valentino, the fa?ade didn’t last long, did it?”

“What’s the point?” said she without care for her tone, “-you saw through me on the first day. I had to keep up the act and see how you’d react.”

Odgar kept quiet, ‘-there it is, Jula’s shown her true self.’

“And, how was it?”

“Amazing, actually. I never expected you to make the first move.”

“Obviously, I had to give an outlet for the real self to portray itself.”

“Which is why you blatantly attacked me and disrupted the good guy persona...”

“Whatever do you mean?” quick on the keyboard, “-I found it weird how a lady did in fact come to power. Don’t get me wrong, the boosts we provided wouldn’t have worked unless it was coordinated.”

“I know,” her long fingers ran through her hair, “-the publicity stunt and sudden disappearances of journalists who didn’t care for my arrival eased the task. Forget what happened earlier, I’m 90% sure to join thy cause, I need a little boost.”

“What else can I provide, money, fame...?”

“No, something much deeper,” she mumbled. The backdrop of the study grew into a sterile room of nothing. They sat facing one another, her true self was the type of overly self-obsessed and self-conscious, ‘-keeping fronts is hard – to maintain a good public image, she had to adopt the good lady act, one who strives to better the world. Odgar entered a relationship despite her personality. We tested each other; the chessboard, I can visualize it, her words were moves, and my rebuttal were counters – the game began the moment she arrived. I couldn’t be more grateful for my cynical side, I

wasn't swayed. Why am I thinking now, she's nearly in my palm. What can I offer...? lightning struck, 'I get it.'

"I'm waiting?" she obnoxiously lounged.

"Friendship."

She slipped, "-the heck?" wrinkles crinkled to accentuate the shock, "-friendship, are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"Are you daft?"

"No, a realist. It was the smile, lady Rozemal, the smile. Once the mask was off, I saw a genuine smile, a sense of joy from speaking thy mind and not being a role model. Odgar has granted the gift of companionship, I offer friendship, whereby, we both mutually benefit."

"..." silence slapped the room, éclair arrived with after meal drinks, "-something the matter, sire?"

"No. Lady Rozemal's a little lost for words."

"Well, my lady, have some tea and think, I'm sure the words will return sooner or later," *-click.* She took a sip in tranquility, '-I'm stunned, can't think about what to say. This man isn't to be taken easily. I set so many traps and he didn't even once budge or show weakness. The suppose taking off my mask was a bluff... he's good, very good,' pressure around her hands snapped her to reality, '-why's Odgar gripping my hand so harshly.'

'Drop the act already,' wrote across his face.

"Is the lady ready to give her answer or must we continue with said game of cat and mouse?"

"I yield," she exhaled, "-no matter the expression and smiles you pull, the aura remains emotionless and profound. A definite sign of being in total control. I'll kindly accept the gift of friendship, viscount Igna."

"Glad to hear. Please, use Igna for short."

"I will," her frown eased, "-do tell, by accepting the friendship, am I bound to Phantom?"

"No, there's no need for such lengths. Friendship is a good enough starting point."

"All that, for this..."

Chapter 693: True Demonlord [24]

Expectation crashed onto the cold wooden corridor, steps made for the lift. The conversation ended with much to speak, '-it's best we don't pursue this conversation,' the night wind blew, over yonder, Odgar in a swift movement, helped his lady into the chopper. Rotors spun to match the nightly gusts in jealousy – similarly, the gate's below opened to welcome the prince and Kul. Hands to the back of his head, '-I'm tired,' he exhaled, the pent-up tension from the day eases, '-I nearly used more than half of the mana reserves. I'll let it regenerate, tomorrow's the 21st; I ought to check the status of the continent.'

And so, the energetic prince stumbled inside, he held Starix and Kul between his arms, “-a little help here...”

éclair heard and turned the corner, “-drunk again?” he wondered uninterestedly.

“Come on, help a brother out.”

“No thanks. Leave them on the couch or something.”

“Very heartless,” returned under the breath.

“Not heartless,” came a wink, “-take care of them, I trust the prince to be up to the task?”

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“Don’t patronize me,” the slumped back rose in a fit, “-I’ll show you my power,” he hurled the two with much bravado, alas, the tensed red forehead strained shy of exploding.

‘They’ll be fine,’ and off he was.

21st rose for all, the continent came to life after a somewhat normal night. Night owls headed to sleep; the true place of terror lived a few minute’s drive. The northern barrier, the quarantined area, news outlets created specific broadcasts for said subject. The infected, Vigilante, and death count, were listed among most things.

“Rise and shine,” *-knock, knock.*

“No, five more minutes,” pleaded a comfy-looking lass.

“Five more minutes and the bath will be filled,” said an understanding voice. Curtains slid after much effort, the screech and overall look of the fabric wasn’t visually pleasing. ‘-Blood,’ thought he who soon spun and shook another, “-wake up, we may or may not have breakfast.”

“Fine,” the blanket slid to reveal Jonl in a spectacular mess of bed hair, “-Hey, wake up,” he elbowed to the side gently.

“No mhm...” said a moan.

“Aptha, you had company last night?”

“No...” her sleep shattered, memories returned piece by piece, “-ask him,” she stood up sharply, “-how can they have intercourse in such close quarters. I was more scared about the bed falling apart...”

“Did I wake you?” said a content expression, “-sorry.”

“I’m sorry too,” woke the lady completely naked, “-good morning, Meza and Aptha,” she slid atop Jonl and stole a kiss, “-here’s my morning present. I’ll see you guys on the battlefield.”

“Wait,” interjected Meza, “-take this,” he flung his coat, “-return it once’s you’re done.”

“Aw, thanks a lot,” noise from the corridor snuck for a few moments and dulled from when the lock clicked, “-Jonl.”

“Meza,” he dropped to the floor, “-good to see you again,” they hugged, “-last night was one of celebration, I didn’t expect her to fall to my charms so easily.”

“Sorry to burst your bubble, she’s already taken, by the whole dorm,” interjected Apatha, “-I know people from Hidros are well-hung, so, please put that thing away, I swear, you people have no tact,” she slammed the door.

“What I do now?”

“Look down, mate,” nodded Meza, “-you’re too careless, the personality sure has changed.”

“I know I changed,” said he, “-I was forced too, can’t be too serious. One must know when to ease and take what little pleasures the world has to offer.” Damning words and fatigued faces, the back and forth of the vigilantes would soon come to view. A refurbished building, ex-school of acting, became the base of operation for the fighters. Here, doctors made a secondary camp, the courtyard became a care center for the fallen. The lightly wounded were taken to the gymnasium. A long large corridor stretched from the dormitory and towards the cafeteria, the dirtied windows cast parallelogram reflections onto the floor, “-another died today,” whispered an adjacent team.

“Did you hear?”

“I don’t know the details,” answered Meza.

“Come on,” the windows gave onto the medic camp, “-what about those infected by the plague?”

“No clue,” he replied softly, “-the heroes are guarding the q-zone, no one is in and no one is out. The AHA has made their intent clear, we are to stand as a shield between the monsters and us. ”

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“What do they think we are?”

“Don’t get riled up, we’re stuck here, there’s no hope of escape even if we wanted to. The special enforcement units guarding the area.”

“If they won’t help, why not lend us those gun-mounted tanks, there is better use here than the outside.” The mundane brown color of the prior hall faded to white and bright; the cafeteria, a large hall, stretched before them. The number of people was halved in the weeks of battle, enough to have seats for everyone present. The display swapped from money to kill count, the more one kills, the more they are rewarded, and of course, not tangible monetary gain.

“Come on, little lady,” said a bigger-looking fellow, “-you’re not going to eat all that, are you?”

“Excuse me, I don’t have time for this...”

“Don’t ignore me,” he pinched her collar, “-little lady, pay for our meals and we promise to protect you on the battlefield.”

“Go to hell,” she pulled, “-if you want to eat, go kill monsters,” the seated crowd didn’t care to watch, focus was on the barely sufficient meal – soup and bread.

“Should we help her?” whispered a nearby table.

“No, hush, don’t look or get involved. The big guy’s the leader of the ruffians...”

“Egh,” he scowled at her disrespect, “-you little pest, we don’t take kindly to disrespect,” they gathered around, “-there are a lot more of payment methods.”

“Get off me,” she dodged their lecherous gaze, ‘-why’s no one trying to help. Look at me, does this not affect you...’

“Come on guys,” said a lady in skimpy clothing, “-are the pent-up frustration so tense you’ll blow it on a child, have some self-respect and try a real woman for size.”

“Cardie,” the gang chuckled, “-alright, “-if you spend the next hour with us, I promise to leave this girl alone forever.”

“Deal,” she winked and led the way through another door. At the same time, Jonl and Meza arrived at the climax, ‘-what happened?’

“Hey, why are you on the floor?” inquired Jonl, “-come on, get up.”

“I was saved,” said she, “-by the girl of this morning...’

“You mean Cardie?” he pulled her up, “-let’s take a seat and talk.” Opposed to an hour, the gang returned after thirty minutes, the empty tray was taken to the trash, “-let’s go,” said Meza, “-I know how you feel, Jonl, it’s disgusting, I know... we can’t fight with odds stacked against us,” the trio made for the outside.

“-you should really think about her,” commented Jonl, “-the little devil’s off again.”

“Ay, big fuck, what did you do with Cardie, where’s she?” stood Apatha with arms crossed.

“Huh?” glared an associate, “-yo, Sins, look, the brat from earlier wants some.”

“You again,” he pulled his nose in disgust, “-listen, kid, your girlfriend was a very tasty meal, her reputation as the dormitory whore stands well. She made me promise not to harm you in any way, and I obliged after a very rough time, I tell ya, her blood is as red as ours.”

“For an elf, the girl had big ol’ hooters,” laughed the other.

“You fuc-”

“Enough,” yelled Meza, “-don’t give to emotions,” he held her hands.

“Looks like mister hotshot’s here,” frowned the man, “-scurry off will you, I don’t want my meal to be ruined.”

“Let’s go,” said Jonl, “-I appreciate the sentiment, Apatha, there are things we must accept.” Thus, the filled cafeteria cleared, each dorm room accommodated four, and the four were assigned tasks in relation to the current war effort, the invasion was a matter of national security. The current estimate of the fighting force was 200 split into teams of four. In other words, 50 squads were on standby for a potential invasion. Squad 05, displayed by a scratch into the door, was on suspension for not following orders. A hero wanted them to take two squads and storm the front, the apparition of the mist figure charged the leader with an unknown sense of courage. Fame and fortune were very enticing. Opposed

to backing the leader, Meza used his authority and surrendered what reputation was acquired to rescue the ten others. In case of deaths, unless new recruits are hired, the missing members are never filled.

Beep, beep, beep, contacted squads left the grounds for the battlefield, the vehicles dashed out the massive entrance. The trio sat beneath a humble tree atop a small hill of what used to be grass, the edge was burned and stained by remnants.

“My balance is just about empty,” sighed Aptha, “-they show no sign of lifting our ban...”

“Look at them sneer at us,” said Jonl, “-I wish we could do something about the situation.”

“Not going to happen,” firmed Meza, “-we’re staying put, I disobeyed orders, the punishment should have been mine alone to bear, I’m sorry I dragged you into this...”

“Guys, guys, look.”

“What?”

“It’s Cardie,” she stood, “-come on, let’s go,”

“Hold it!” exclaimed Jonl.

“What?” she returned an impatient expression.

“Look better,” said Meza, “-she’s been called to duty.”

“No... she can’t fight...”

“Why do you say so?”

“Her body... it’s been beaten, I can’t let this happen,” she sprinted to the front.

“Wait... huff, puff, wait, wait...”

“Who’s this brat?” inquired the leader.

“Aptha,” said she, “-if it’s about this morning, don’t worry...”

“No, not that,” her eyes fired to the leader, “-can’t you see she’s injured?”

“I know she is,” returned he, “-however, we need healers to support the effort. Don’t get in my way,” he brushed her aside.

“WAIT!” she screamed, the voice echoed throughout the yard, everyone in proximity turned and stared.

“What’s your deal?” wondered he embarrassed from the attention.

“At least let me heal her for a bit...”

“Whatever, we’re leaving in thirty minutes. Same place, Cardie, and I expect great things,” he smirked and left.

“Are you insane?” wondered the fatigued lady.

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“Says you,” they moved under the tree, “-move aside,” the healing spell began instantly, Jonl and Meza held their tongue and bafflement. Leaves swayed, the branches scraped off one another, “-I’m sorry for earlier.”

“Why are you apologizing?” wondered Cardie.

“You saved me and got hurt. Kindness must be repaid ten-fold, I’m not much use, but still, I can heal people. Enough for me, I’m glad I can do this for you.”

“Jonl,” said Cardie, “-you have a lovely healer, she’s awesome.”

“Trust me, I know,” he chuckled, “-thanks for what you did this morning, we should have been there to protect a teammate.”

“Don’t worry,” said she, “-I’ll be fine, take care of yourselves. The world doesn’t move without sacrifice, compared to you, Apha, my healing abilities are childlike. I’m more suited for the position of the rear guard, I was taught to hang back, provide support and heal, Alpha truly is a shitshow of a place, I want to go back.”

“Say that again,” facepalmed Jonl, “-back home, adventurers are united and share a common goal. Fame comes to the lucky, survival is granted to all, nothing like this prison.”

“Us people of Arda are strong,” she smiled, “-I feel better, my regeneration should soon kick in. Take care Jonl, Apha, and Meza, I’ll see you guys later,” her smile on said sunny day would soon be foiled.

“I’ll see you guys later, she said,” gritted Jonl, “-they made her take the front line to protect a foolish hero...”

“Keep the emotions in check,” said Meza stood in the shadow under an overpass. The elf’s infected body, of which passed the barely visible passage above, was taken to the Q-zone, once beyond those doors, there’s no chance of return.

“Why her, she’s helped me, she helped us, always had a smile and was strong,” tears unknowingly flowed, “-and yet, they treated her like an outsider, you know as well as I do!”

“Don’t,” fired Meza, “-I know, I know, don’t say it aloud, we’re in public...”

“I can’t,” she shook her head and ran.

“Should we?” suggested Jonl.

“I don’t have the right to decide,” he hammered the wall with a closed fist, “-even now, I think about us instead of Cardie, I don’t have the right to stop Apha.”

“Fine, I’ll go after her.”

Chapter 694: True Demonlord [25]

“Watch out, lady,” said a monotonous voice, a sharp sensation of bones jabbing into the ribs brought a little wince. The pain wasn’t much for said reaction, rather, the startled facial expression was one of dismay, “-are you crying?”

"I'm sorry," she sniffled, "-I've never seen you around here before."

"Aptha, Aptha," a hasty sprint beckoned from the crowd like a menacing creature of which growled, or so was the image painted by the loud steps, "-I found you," said the man quick to grab her elbow, "-don't run away from us, it's bad manners, and I also don't want to see you get in trouble."

"I'm sorry," her head kept to the floor, "-I guess I got emotional, I mean, someone who we just met saved me, got beaten, forced onto the battlefield, and was then infected by the plague, I can't anymore, this place is a mess, I want to escape..." Between her solemn words of regret, Jonl cast a nod to the straight-faced stranger.

"Not my place to say," he interjected, "-I think it's good to cry for another," a strong hand gripped her shoulders, moved under her face, and showed a handkerchief, "-those who embrace the world of death and slaughter can never go back. Cheer up, Aptha of Squad 05."

"Have we met before?" wondered Jonl.

"Yes we have," the chin rose with a stark smile, "-I was the one who fought alongside the Empress of Alpha so many weeks ago, remembers?"

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"No..."

"I remember," said a distant voice, "-Igna Haggard, the man who singlehandedly fought the invasion. You were of great help, sad to say many of whom were rescued, are either ashes or in the Q-zone."

"Nice to see a familiar face," nodded Igna, "-this I presume is your team?"

"Yes," he nodded, "-might I ask why thou art here?"

"Hold a moment," cried Jonl, "-are you THE Igna Haggard, the devil of Glenda?"

"Correct," he tapped his close palm against the man's chest, "-a fellow compatriot of Hidros, I see the bronze tag, you must be very skilled."

"I was trained at the adventuring Tower by Achilles and lady Undrar, the remnants of the legendary Kniq."

"Oh, I'm surprised you didn't notice my outfit," he turned to show the wings, "-my uncle had a spare lying about; figured, why not put it to good use."

"Takes me back," replied the adventurer.

"Wait, are you the one who helped out during the influx of patients?"

"Correct, you were too busy to notice. Good job on healing the wounded, if not for that, there's no telling what could have happened," the forehead rose toward the suspended hallway, "-there goes another. Is that the Q-zone I've heard about?"

"Yes..."

"Hold on a moment," voiced Meza, "-why is a noble from another country here, a prince no less."

“Someone’s up to date with worldwide politics,” he chuckled, “-I came to do one thing, and tis fight monsters. The invasion has hampered business for the town, we can’t allow the beasts to spoil the land. Besides, I got bored.”

“Not to be rude... if I was bored, I’d just head out and have fun,” commented the little lady.

“Easier said than done,” he winked, “-anyway, I was asked by the chief of police to come help,” there, memories of the last hour rushed.

“Igna, as a friend of mine, I need you to help in the war effort against the monsters. The plague’s bad news for the whole continent. The invasion up north has gotten worse, the AHA won’t be able to supervise for long, their leadership is abysmal, try to evaluate the current regime. I haven’t heard good rumors. Goes without saying, there’s no need to fight if you don’t want to, use your skill as an Alchemist and help the injured. Finding a cure is a long-lasting goal, you know what I mean, don’t you?”

“Very blatant. Your expression doesn’t hide the conspiring allure. I’ll go take a look; I was curious about the situation too. In any case, what about the leaders, if they are to be inadequate?”

“Do what you want,” she smiled, “-we’re friends tied by loyalty. No matter the mess befalls, I’ll stand right beside you.”

“And if mess ever befalls you, I’ll come to aid. Welcome to the great family of Phantom, I trust you spoke to Lady Elvira?”

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“Yes, she said she’d send a few members to take care of the unruly adversaries. I’m happy; I can finally look to the future and not worry about my back.”

“Blatantly trusting another party, who is to say I’m not going to backstab?”

“You won’t. I’ll bet my life on it; you won’t backstab someone who thee said is a friend. Those relations are too precious to give, I heard all about it from Odgar.”

“Fine, whatever,” the call ended, and he found himself walking in the company of squad 05. Arrows of judgmental leers impaled their targets, Apatha kept her confidence no matter the situation. Meza chose to be discreet whilst Jonl was just present. On the surface, as a unit, they seemed weak and uninteresting. Below said level, there was talent and strength; éclair did an in-depth analysis of potential allies – once, inside the warzone, there was no turning back, for normal people that is.

“I ought to ask again,” they turned for the main office, “-why do you need to see the manager?”

“He’s the top of the food chain here, is he not?”

“Yes...” returned a troubled tone, “-not to be a bother, the manager’s quite the interesting character.”

“-Interesting character, how nice of you,” they arrived.

“Over there,” pointed Apatha, “-take the stair, turn right, should be at the end.”

“I appreciate the kindness,” he smiled and left. The dried soil, stuffy air, and overall atmosphere of blandness told much in the ways of the outpost. Soldiers were littered around the premises; makeshift

watch towers overlooked the outskirts of the barrier. 'securities more focused towards the south opposed to the north,' he stopped shy of the entrance. Another team, 03, gave once overs and made for the stairs, 'the scent of blood,' he side-glanced.

"Go on ahead of me," said a hooded figure in black and grey. Two swords laid in an X-shape on the back, daggers, and darts were around the waist and an ample amount of gadgetry. The front of the pack stopped and stared, the focus made for Igna, "-let's go," said the leader.

'What was that?' he paused and stared at the strange figure, deep hazel eyes and long lashes came through the mask, 'éclair...'

"Name, Loftha Sultria. My lord, tis the lady of before."

'Loftha...' a step back, "-something you need?"

"Oh, sorry," the head shook suddenly, "-did I stare too much?"

"Yes, you did. I'm surprised to see someone of such high value partaking in the battle."

'What?' the feet moved to grow the distance, '-wait, does he know who I am. Why's he here, I don't understand,' a gust forced a blink, her hands rose to shield her face, '-where's he gone?'

"Princess," said a whisper, "-I've found you."

'-He knows... I should have kept my head down, why did I stare at him, am I an idiot?'

"I don't know who you're talking about, there's no one by the name of Loftha here."

"Are you serious, so much for being undercover?"

"Excuse me," cried another team, "-you're in the way."

"My apologies," he took her arms and moved onto the lawn, turned the corner, and faced the broken townscape, and sat atop a boulder. "-Loftha Sultria, why are you here?"

"Don't use my full name, Igna Haggard," she pulled down her mask, "-I'm surprised you knew," her grey hair waterfalled onto her shoulders, "-I could ask the same question."

"Ladies first?"

"Stop being a sexist," returned instantly, "-stop messing around."

"Fine, no need to burst a blood vessel. I'm here to help in the war efforts."

"Is that it?" her head tilted, "-I don't trust that reason, not enough for a man of your caliber... no, there's more to it, come on, spill."

"For a princess, you sure have no tact, do you?"

"Don't question my lineage," said a pout.

"I'm pleasingly surprised. You have the charm of a cheerful lady, or maybe tis an act. Either way, I enjoy said side of you, guess the Empress's melted thy heart, hasn't she."

“No...”

“The flushed cheeks could say otherwise,” he smiled and faced the town; the pupils were bicolored, Origin’s emotion swayed the heart warmly, a nicer feeling – a break from all that had happened beforehand, “-say, Loftha, why do you fight, what’s the reason?”

“I don’t have a reason. I do it because I feel empty, my brothers and sisters have always treated me like a child. In a way, I guess I wanted to be useful. Sister Eira is amazing, she won over lady mother right after you left, I don’t remember her words exactly – there was a light to her tone, a warm touch, I can’t describe it, she felt more than just a human, something divine, akin to a goddess.”

“I get it, akin to a goddess. Sounds like her alright.”

“What about you?”

“Something about the current invasion doesn’t feel right. I need answers, researching the plague first hand might be useful in the long run.”

“What about family, once inside the barrier, there’s no going back.”

“It should be fine; éclair has the manor under control. Midne’s quite the hard worker, she’s a good person when all is said and done.”

‘-Also, Vanesa’s under Lilith’s care. I’m a bad father, I should be there for them, well,’ he turned to the side, ‘-I’ll go visit more regularly, I must be there for them.’

“Not going to participate in the battle?”

“I don’t see the point,” he exhaled, “-I say, let the vigilantes fight. I came here as an Alchemist.”

“Alchemist... and you?”

“Don’t underestimate me,” he displayed the crest, “-I retook the test on behalf of my uncle and was reinstated as a state-level Alchemist. The examinations have grown dull over the years.”

“Didn’t expect the Igna Haggard to be researcher material.”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover,” he stood, “-the team’s looking for you. Wear the mask, the trio are royal guards, aren’t they,” stopped at the corner, “-go help out thy people, princess, may the blessing of gods keep thee strong in battle.”

Grass and pebbles shuffled under the steps until silence, ‘-why do I feel so warm,’ she wore the mask, ‘-was that the allure of a vampire or just his charm... Igna Haggard, you’re a threat to me, I hope we don’t see one another again,’ her warm expression soon drowned under the disguise, ‘-time to go.’

Each took their path, ‘-Here I am, manager Brand of the Scaica’s western division.’ *Knock, knock,* “-enter,” said an exasperated tone.

“Sorry, do you have an appointment?” said a lady to the right corner.

“Yes, Viscount Igna Haggard, lady Valentino must have spoken of my arrival.”

“Oh yes, please take a seat right here.”

'Heard right, the Manager's lazy.'

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"How can I be of help?" asked the charismatic lady.

"I've come in good faith on behalf of an independent laboratory, Clao Mule," the alchemist crest soon rested atop the table, "-the research firm's linked to the University of Rotherham, I want to have full authority on files pertaining to the current Plague and full access to the laboratory."

"Excuse you, noble or not, we have rules in place to restrict the spread of the plague."

"I won't be in direct contact of the plague," her expression didn't budge, "-fine, how about this. I'll ask my team to bring over a mobile research center, would it be adequate then?"

"No, no," said the manager, "-not going to happen, the others will get the wrong idea. There's a lot of broken buildings, refurbish one of 'em. We've taken a large portion of the town, big enough space to start anew."

"Should be enough. What about the restrictions?" she wondered.

"Greenlit him as a full-fledge medic. State level-chemist are on another level, my only condition is simple, don't create too much of a mess, I don't want to clean up..."

"Well, manager, you have a deal. Live and let live, is the motto?"

"Yeah, you understand, I'm glad. Tis a yes from me, Oprhee."

Chapter 695: True Demonlord [26]

"Right." The file-filled table soon spilled into a frenzy, the secretary's casual allure swapped for one of utmost dexterity. Her fingers slid upon keys and keys, the next minute, a faint sound of paper halted her sprint. "-Viscount Haggard, I've registered you as a full-fledge medic, you have access to the laboratory and anything in-between. The alchemic crest will be your pass to restricted areas, be sure to check with us if ever you need to step out. I hope the stay will be meaningful, not just for our sake, but for the people too. Good day, Lord; take note, any building claimed will have its ownership transferred to thee after the plague ends. One per person says the mandate. Anyway, we wish you well."

Thus ended the meeting, '-they were very accommodating,' the office, a looming shadow on his back, softly faded into the cloudy noon, '-or act as if they are...'

"He's gone," whispered the secretary.

"Good, we dodged a bullet," said the manager, "-that man is best kept in our good graces. I value the heritage and prodigy of a person's backing, he has support from the best; if someone can change the outcome of this pointless war, tis him. For now, keep an eye on the princess, the board of directors was very strict about her situation. We'll assign a hero to spy, is it clear?"

"Yeah, very much," she nodded, "-what about the viscount?"

"I told you, nothing. Leave the man be, he knows my motto and won't get involved unless we probe. I like people like that, they won't move unless you move. You know me, I hate moving. Time for a break, take care of matters here, I'll head out."

Streets bore cracks and fissures, at intervals, burnt cars, broken trucks, toppled buildings, and an overall feeling of misery hid beneath each layer of dust. Currently, the location was in the middle-ish, close enough to treat patients, and far enough to stray the monsters. The layout broke into four zones; starting with Zone One, the outskirts within which rests the office and dormitory. Access to said party is granted, most deliveries are done here. The effect of the invasion begins in Zone Two; at the start of the broken townscape, monsters often roam the area – mainly strays. Here was once a booming market area for the locals, a well-knitted community of old and new traders. Zone Three, the prep-zone before battle, monsters are frequent and unpredictable, some weak, others boss-class, lastly, Zone Four, the land of monsters, also known as the outskirts of town. Here, the only path is forward to Fuda Mountains. Hence was the new layout. On top of Zones, there were Quadrants of which acted like an x and y-axis. Quadrants went from 1 to 5 (1 representing the West, and 5 the East). Together, the separations made area codes, for example, Q3 Zone 2, was the prep zone before the battle area, whilst Q3 Zone 3, was the actual place of bloodshed. Remove the codes, and it just meant the main road from where the battle originated.

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The separation was done in necessity, stop needless deaths, and halt the spread if ever the battle goes sour. A makeshift hospice laid to the west, in area Q1 Zone 2. Here, buildings naturally interlock to form traps and empty alleys for the stray. A hero and at least 5 squads would be on standby until recently, the former was replaced by 2 more squads. Vigilantes are free to roam the streets of Zone 1, 2, and 3.

Deployment details were under the manager's jurisdiction. Funds for the battles have been provided by the AHA for the bitter part of a few months, monster drops make it easier to send men to their death on the slim chance of an artifact being found. That being said, the evolving situation was best left to time and the adjusting fighters.

'éclair sure has done a lot of research. I underestimated the area, very big. The hospice is to the west,' he leaped atop a somewhat tall edifice, '-the middle portion has been completely locked by barriers and physical walls. There's a faint outline in the sky showing quadrant and zone. Suppose Alpha has its technological prowess too,' he sat off the edge, '-let's see,' a squint enhanced the distant images, '-a patrol team seems to have run into trouble. I'll fall back if I were you,' they did so with much effort, a single fighter stood strong and fought, '-the monsters are very strong,' they crossed from Zone 2 to Zone 1, where the military was focused, mounted turrets locked and decimated the beasts. 'A good strategy, lure the uglies to their demise.'

A pair of black-colored pupils locked onto his back; a screech marked the attack. *Woosh,* he moved, the crow-like monster missed the head, '-weakling,' *bang,* brain matter splattered on the opposite building. '-Zone 3 has monsters. I guess I'll take a stand here,' he walked off the edge and landed on a two-story high building, '-should be enough to start,' he dropped onto the street. 'For what it's worth, this will do fine,' the eyes bleached white, a barrier rose around the building, '-restore, be new, and suit my purpose.' *Snap* broken walls were fixed, the ground floor had four rooms, while the first floor was a big open area. '-Got rid of the furniture, a few chairs and beds are enough,' he ambled along the

wooden floor, parted a solemn piece of cloth, and entered the back area. ‘A decent laboratory sure used up a lot of energy to conjure from memory.’

“EXCUSE ME.”

“Hello, anyone in there?”

“HELLO, CAN YOU HEAR US?”

‘Who’s making all that racket,’- he stormed through the main door, “-what’s the matter?”

“Oh, sorry,” said a trio, “-we heard gunshots and thought someone was in danger.”

“How very nice. Sadly,” he pointed to the right; “-I think you ought to be more careful.”

A horde of turned wolves pelted across the street, “-OH SHIT,” cried one, “-RUN, WE CAN’T TAKE THEM ON.”

“Come on man, let us in,” said another, “-we’ll hide until they go away.”

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“No, this property is mine, I’m not keen on having mutts roaming the newly refurbished building...”

“COME ON, WE NEED TO DO SOMETHING.”

“Fuck this,” said another, “-I’M OUT!” he turned his back and ran.

“WAIT FOR ME,” cried the lady of the group, “-I’m not in a mood to be devoured,” her short hair flowed into the opposing draft.

“Run, my companions, run, I shall stand ground and fight.”

‘What’s with them, are they newbies?’

“Face me in good faith,” he took out a rocket launcher from out of nowhere, “-DIE!” the recoil shook the adjacent pebbles, *boom,* smoke puffed in a shapeless cloud. *Grr,* two of the four leaped, ‘-wait, I thought I killed,’ yellow teeth lain with blood and carcass leaped for his face, an arm rose to counter the attack.

“Face the enemy,” said a monotonous voice, *Blood-Arts: Crimson Threads,* a clean strike through the middle, two became four, and its disgusting inners were opened for all to see, “-the first mistake, cower before death.”

“Did you save me?”

“No, I don’t want someone to be mauled before the building.”

CRASH, an unknown explosion echoed from the opposite end, ‘-is that?’ *Mana Control: Wind Element Variant: Flutter,* a bed of air carried the unconscious bodies.

“Harlie, Jonas...”

“Big problem,” cautioned Igna, “-we have a strong foe approaching.” Chains scraped across the road, a siren ran, distress signal went across the channels.

“Run, it’s the chain monster, you have to run...” begged the injured.

“Yeah, about the farewell, you’ll be fine. The injuries are minor,” returned Igna, “-I’m not entertained by the comical relief. Art thou the best the vigilantes can provide?” he crossed into the street, “-children must stay home and playhouse, there’s no place for weaklings on the battlefield.”

“How dare you.”

“Watch,” he snarled, “-the chain monster,” in the distance waddled a behemoth of a figure. Bare-chested and large, the head, a ball of black, held no facial features. The arms, buffed beyond the limitation of what is normal – each step made a crater, the road couldn’t hold its weight. The hands were tied by a chain, each swing brought carnage and destruction.

Urgent Mission: Available vigilantes, head to Q5 Zone 3, the Chain boss has appeared. Urge it towards Zone 4. I repeat, a boss-level crisis has risen.

“Did you hear?”

“I did,” exhaled Meza, “-we can’t help even if we wanted,” countless footsteps rushed for the transport trucks.

“First time I’ve seen the masked fighter,” commented Aptha, “-any idea?”

“If only we could join in the fight, the beast has a bounty of five thousand.”

To the east, “-Princess, is it wise?”

“Silence guards, I’ll hear none of it,” she returned, “-we can’t allow it to cross into Zone 2, there are still supplies we can make use off,” a timid hue outlined her body, ‘-I’ll kill you, Chain monster,’ the ground buckled under her feet.

“We’re safe,” said Harlie, “-we’re sorry about the lack of seriousness.”

“It’s the first time we were sent on patrol,” returned Jonas, “-it’s my fault, I wanted to venture into the battle and see the monsters first hand.”

“I guess the building’s going to be destroyed,” said the leader.

“Bunda, it was fun while it lasted,” exhaled Harlie, “-we saw a strong opponent, whatever happens, I’m glad.”

“Can a man get some silence?” shouted Igna, “-what’s the deal, he doesn’t look that strong, does it?”

“How can you be so calm?”

“I don’t know,” he sat atop the surrounding stone brick wall, “-look at him go,” it spun and devastated the closest construction, “-a big baby roaming around town. I say we let him play.” *GRARRRR* rattled the ground, ‘-holy, tis a strong one. Is it a boss class or just an evolution, I’m very interested.’

“Hey, should we not evacuate or something?” suggested Harlie, “-I’m pretty sure the others are on their way.”

“Sit right down,” fired Igna, “-newbies need to see the battle first hand. Here’s a tip, if one is weak and needs battle experience; one must learn to watch and visualize the battle, think while the battle plays out, what would you do, how to counter, how to lure. The battlefield, whether against monsters or humans, is a sacred place where only the strong thrive.”

“Hey, man, are you some kind of hero?” shrugged Bunda, “-you look and talk like the typically underestimated hotshot...”

“Are you daft?” laughed Igna, “-I’m no hero. I’m the Devil.”

“Oh, look, someone has child syndrome...” whispered Jonas.

“Says the man who turned tails before mutts. Do what thee wish, I have furniture to rearrange. Harlie, and Bunda, come with me, Jonas, you stand guard.”

“WHAT WHY?” cried the short-haired Harlie, “-why must we listen to thee...” black eyes and faded pink hair gave impressions of a crazy doll opposed to a sane individual.

“Because I said so,” voiced Igna, “-don’t forget, I rescued thee from the attack. Now, as newbies, you’ll work for me.”

“Dude man,” came from the front, “-I think you need to recheck the priorities,” a shadow flew and stopped shy of the yard, “-the monster’s taken a liking to us.”

‘Found you, wait, there’re people here?’ she dipped to fly faster, ‘-I won’t make it.’

“Watch and learn,” *Ancient spell of the heretics, rise from the depths of hell, burn as thee crawl towards the light, form in the land of the living, and burn all to ash – cherish in the inferno of devil’s lair; Striogna,* a circle drew onto the ground, various symbols expanded to form a complex tapestry, *die,* An outburst of white flames erupted to what seemed to be the heavens – the trapped beast’s charred skin rejuvenated, ‘-oh, I see, the ability to create invulnerability against elemental attacks,’
GRAAAAAA.

“Come forth Vengeance, take care of the trash, will you?”

“With pleasure,” it dove into the eruption, white lines soon sliced into various shapes.

Dispel, ashes snowed. The princess landed, ‘-what happened?’ they locked eyes.

Chapter 696: True Demonlord [27]

Operation canceled; Boss-level monster Chains has been defeated. Victor, unknown, more information in the afternoon announcements. Mobilized force of nearly fifty men returned with smiles and easy glances.

“We’re lucky we didn’t fight,” said one. Many squads were sat in often crowded transport trucks, intimacy and the sharp pain of weapons jabbing into the neighbor, a nice ride towards death.

“Second that,” voiced another, “-listen up boys, those who aren’t on patrol duty, come to Q5 Zone 2. We’re hosting celebrations for a new tavern and marketplace.”

“Cheers for the new tavern!” went about the rowdy interior.

Snow, timid and feeble, descended from the moon’s white motif. Specks of ashes landed atop the open palm, ‘-what happened...’ wondered Jonas, ‘-was I inside a tornado of flame?’

An energetic figure landed and stormed its way to Igna’s face, “-what did you do?”

“I only protected what was mine. Listen, masked man, I wish to hear none from a bystander. I defeated the beast fair and square, if there’s any trouble, take it to the leader.”

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“No, the issue isn’t about who defeated the beast.”

“Hey, we’ll excuse ourselves,” nodded Harlie, “-come on, Bunda,” she took his arm and left. Gale blew from the mountain, a dim mist settled onto Zone 4 and Zone 5, cautionary warnings flashed across the numerous communication channels.

Beware, night is upon us – monster activity will spike to its apex in a few hours. Those on patrol duties, make way to Q3 Zone 2; medics and healers, please return and make for the hospice. Another day of battle has been completed.

“The weather took a change for the worse,” the fog thickened as did the lowered temperature, “-come on, princess, drop the mask, we’re alone. There’s a bathroom at the back, take a shower or whatnot.”

“Igna, why be so courteous?”

“There’s no point in fighting one another,” said a gentle smile, “-I’ll fix up something to eat. Shall we wait for the fog to ease a little?”

“Sound good,” the mask lifted and revealed her rosy lips, to which it cringed in pain, the fabric caught her earring, *-ai, ai, aiiiiiii.* Igna, who stood idly and watched, had a strange feeling wash over, ‘-she’s awkwardly fun to hang around with.’ Agile as a cat, the fingers reached and unstrained the fabric, “-there,” he pulled, “-must be hard, the mask seems high quality and tedious to wear.”

“You helped me?” her brows crinkled, ‘-what’s wrong with him, I thought he hated me and my family, I don’t get it...’

“Go on, princess,” thus, they split, the days stress and fatigue washed under the warm stream of water, ‘-heaven,’ a relieved exhale carried for an adjacent mirror, ‘-what’s the purpose, should I be wary of him or accept the kindness. What did big sister say?’ the eyes closed in thought.

“What kind of person Igna is?” the fuzzy outline of the Ice Empress sat in what seemed to be a lonely chair surrounded by faceless silhouettes, “-I don’t know, I can’t say I know him, goes the same for everyone I’ve met and will ever meet. It’s foolish to assume you know a person from the subjective image one has of another. I know, tis common knowledge by this point, human beings are complex people – as for a nightwalker, they’re twice as complicated. They’re superior in every way to another human, a purebred is akin to a demi-god, I say with heart, if ever the nightwalkers rally under the same

banner, the world might not survive. Enough about his kind, my cousin's a bit of a weird one, whimsical, thinks about himself most of the time, and most likely is rude to anyone he meets. I won't ask for sympathy or whatnot, some people care about him. I can say this for sure, if ever someone he cares about is in a problem or danger, even if he were weak, I bet the man to drop everything and run to the rescue. No one values the bond of friendship like him. Trust me, if you get to know, take the chance, he'll annoy the hell out of thee, keep an eye out, there are moments where he shows his true self, a humble man who returns kindness and malice in full. Meet him in good faith, you'll see. About the personality type, I found the better word, mercurial."

'Mercurial,' the water halted, '-very tedious, here I thought I was a handful,' her reflection stared back, '-meet him in good faith, I'll try.'

Creek, '-oh, a bag with a change of clothes,' an oversized hoodie paired with shorts and a beanie of which held cat ears, '-is this the best he could have done... wait,' she took out a pair of heavy black shoes, '-boots, aren't these expensive?' curious to the brand, '-oh, yeah, I knew it...' her face lit in glee, '-these clothes are expensive, what, what?' Hastily in her outfit, '-I like it, I mean, the pairing works, I'm definitely a few inches taller,' she stepped out, a harsh aroma of fully wound up spice sucker-punched her into a sneeze, '-my eyes and nose,' she coughed and made for the upstairs.

"Hey, returned Igna cupped into the corner of the room, "-are the clothes to your liking?" a stained cloth wrapped around the mouth muffled the tone.

"Come again?" she climbed and sat opposite the cooking station, "-what you say?"

"Wait a second," ingredients flung in a glistening coat of juices, the stinging pain soon eased to a bearable level, "-done," the cloth lowered to a badly positioned scarf, "-I asked if the clothes were nice?"

"About them," she leaned on the table, "-where did you get these?"

"From the storage," a portal opened, "-see," the arms reached to take out a branded watch, "-carrying around a backpack isn't a good idea. Besides, the storage space's limitation is what I impose," he flung the accessory, "-keep it, I bought the latter to assess the craftsmanship of Meldorino, the strap is nice – the movement inside is atrocious, sure it looks nice on the outside, the inside is a garbled mess of stolen mechanism."

"Alright, the gifts are getting on my nerves."

"Oh, let me guess," he began to plate, "-you think I'm giving these in ways similar to fattening a pig before a feast?"

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"Yeah, somewhat."

"Don't worry," he carried the beautifully dressed plates, "-what happened at the beach estate wasn't anyone's fault. I gained strong allies and my cousin managed to make up with her family, all and all, I say tis a good deal. You truly hate my guts, don't you."

"Wow, look at the mister Smartypants."

“Awkward,” said he in a little jingle, “-don’t call anyone smarty pants again.” The tempest outside grew into a full thunderstorm, lightning struck maliciously, the already unstable debris, fell, rain poured heavily.

“Very delicious,” said she, “-the stories about you being an excellent chef are well based.”

“It’s elementary, don’t compliment the food too much. I wish I could prepare something better. My problem, worry not, I’ll take the compliment, thank you very much.”

‘He’s hiding something, Chef Leko if memory serves well.’ The outside light dimmed to naught, the room dropped to black.

“Have you eaten?” inquired Igna.

“Yeah, where’s the light?”

“Electricity was knocked by Chain’s rampage.” *Mana Control: Light Element Variant: Firefly.* orbs scattered about the room.

“Beautiful,” said she.

“Here,” he threw another piece of cloth, “-the assassin outfit must be a pain to wear. Use that when there’s no fight; it’s imbued by magic, the wearer gains the trait of grey man. Speaking to another won’t reveal thy identity.”

“Expensive clothes, a watch, and now this, a piece of magical gear. Igna, I can accept the former, the this... the gear is too valuable to be thrown around lightly. Magical enchantments cost a fortune to acquire...”

“Oh, don’t worry, I enchanted it. Therefore, the cost is mine to bear. Don’t misunderstand, it isn’t a gift, tis insurance. Your identity needs to be hidden.”

“I suppose I should repay the kindness...”

“Sure, I’ll wait patiently. The rain seems to have eased, shall we head out?”

“It’s 18:00, monsters prowl the streets.”

“They’re obstacles at the end of the day,” the roar of a very fast machine pulled into the tiny yard, “-transport’s here.”

“Transport?” she followed down the stairs, ‘-he skipped like a kid just now, I’m confused beyond belief.’ Headlights stormed through the entrance, “-a sports bike?” her jaws dropped underneath the mask, “-how loaded are you?”

“Me?” he stopped and stared, “-money isn’t an issue,” a snarky thumbs up followed into, “-there should be a backpack in the room outback, put the outfit, we’re leaving.”

“Where?”

“The dormitory,” he straddled the Spuntna X8V2 SST, ‘-good thing I had éclair bring it over.’

“Not to be rude, isn’t flying the better option?”

“No, not really, flying’s for extreme circumstances only.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it’s too fast. Lock the door and let’s go.”

“The rain?”

“Use those powers to keep it away.”

“Wait a moment,” she straddled the bike, ‘-were we not fighting a few days ago, he speaks to me with reckless abandon...’

“Don’t get worked up; it comes across weird and scheming, I know, still, you’re family to my sister, want it or not, the families are united.” Strong on the start, they burst onto the streets and darted across the roads. Debris, boulders, monsters, name it, and the obstacle was there, ‘-maniac,’ it got air time, ‘-holy sh-,’ she unknowingly gripped his stomach, “-are you c-c-c-crazy?”

“Don’t talk, else you’ll bite your tongue.” 10 minutes later, the gritty-sounding bike pulled into the parking lot.

“I’m surprised they have cars,” the helmet came off.

“Zone 1 is still considered normal.”

“Well, we’re here, want to get off?”

“No,” the petrified expression sufficed, “-give me a few more seconds, my legs are dancing.”

“See, I told you, driving is more fun than flying. On the roads, death may strike suddenly, face the ultimate end in stride.”

“I admit, I had fun.”

Off the bike and around to the back near the medical camp; adequate lights shone lightly, the addition of spotlights added a little touch of flare, “-what was the announcement about?” they ambled into the uninfected first-aid area.

“A report of the day’s casualties, death, that sort of thing.”

“My head...” said a whimper, “-I can’t see...” the medics up ahead were busy, a broken-down jeep carrying injured arrived. What little forces were available were drawn thin, “-help me...”

“I should get to work,” said Igna, “-let’s hang out another time.”

“Wait, you leaving already?”

“I’m a medic, remember, I came here to research the plague and heal the injured. Also, before you leave, I forgot to say something.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“You’re a weird girl,” he dipped inside the tent.

“WHAT?” she frowned and made for the inside, ‘-what does he mean weird?’ along the way, the various vigilantes took notice and gawked, ‘-oh, I forgot,’ the phone showed her reflection, ‘-I’m wearing quite the outfit. Let’s see, does the mask work,’ she tapped the side of her jaw, the attention soon vanished, ‘-people still notice but don’t pay much attention. I’m impressed, he’s very talented.’

“-A-A-are y-y-you?”

“Chill out,” down on one knee, “-you were stabbed by a rusty spear, don’t worry,” he donned surgical gloves, ‘-treat the physical wounds then use potions and healing spells to accelerate rejuvenation.’

“Heavily wounded,” echoed from a frantic cry, “-she was stabbed in the neck....”

“Take her to that camp over there,” pointed a man with a bloodied white coat.

“Doctor...”

“COME ON MAN,” cried he who carried the lady, “-we all know the camp over there are for people who aren’t for this world.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” he ignored the man’s plea, “-we’re out-staffed, tis a triage. For the greater good, those unable to fight another day will be abandoned, I’m sorry my friend.”

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“DON’T GIVE ME THAT CRAP!” attention focused on the supervisor.

“Stop standing and move the patients. As for you, there’s no hope for the lady, take her to the camp else we use the collar,” sharp daggers dug into the woeful expression.

“You’re all the same...”

‘Sorry my friend, should have taken her to the hospice; there’s no way I can treat her in such harsh conditions.’

“Doctor...” said a sympathetic glance.

“Don’t worry about me Ada, focus on the others.”

Chapter 697: True Demonlord [28]

“Doctor my ass,” the medical tent’s curtain doors parted, “-I’m sorry I was a bad leader, it should have been me taking guard, not you,” blood flowed from the neck to the ground, her complexion paled, “-damn it...” tears fell from the man’s visage, “-I don’t want to lose you, or anyone...”

“Could you keep the melodrama to a minimum,” returned a monotonous voice. The furrowed brows rose to a sight of disbelief, pages hovered above the patient, a gentle hue outlined the wounds – the one responsible, young in age, moved dexterously with an earthly calmness. One side of the tent held the mortally wounded left to die with the bare minimum, a flask of sleep-inducing drink, laid in a cabinet to the back, “-war’s a rough place. Put her on the bed there,” an arrow shaped red crystal pointed to his left, “-she’ll be fine, the bleeding seems to have stopped.”

“How can you, you haven’t even taken a look at us.”

"I can sense her life essence, all in the world is bound by mana; what physical form one takes is a reflection of their spiritual form or ethereal psychic; in layman's term, the human soul. Those who can freely manipulate mana are those who dictate the fate of most. Just so it happens," strings swiftly stitched the patient, "-I'm here to help."

"Who are you?"

"An alchemist, worry not about the small details," he rushed over, "-was she inflicted by the monster curse?"

"No, I don't think so, an arrow grazed her neck, she fe-"

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"Yeah, should be enough," a blueish hue robed about her wound, "-she's lost a lot of blood, good job to the healer, they did awesomely in terms of first-aid," wiping the sweaty forehead, "-I'll treat her wounds, ask for the head doctor if there's blood to spare. If not, ask him for the testing kit, we might just have to do a transfusion on the spot."

"I will," a nod and a dash – whimpers from the other patients came in volleys.

'An Alchemist, I suppose I ought to save all of them. Coming here made me realize one thing, the thrill of a battle will never be quenched. Life and death, seeing warriors fight until they yield, strong monsters who don't belong to Scifer's realm; I might have stumbled onto a path.'

Scattered footsteps made across the yard, "-Doctor," panted the vigilante.

"Not right now," scowled a nurse, "-the doctor is busy," she stepped outside, "-I'll take care of matters here, doctor. Good luck."

"Thank you, Ada," a melancholic expression remained.

"What is it?" inquired the lady, her outfit, stained by blood and other dirtied substances; short hair tied tightly behind her back, a blue surgical mask, and darker complexion, "-are you going to cause a fit?"

"No, no," he regained his breath, "-Nurse, I've come here to ask for blood. There's an Alchemist who's healing the patients. He asked for a blood testing kit if there was no blood available."

"Excuse you?" she pushed him aside and stormed forward, '-alchemist, tis not the place for part-timers. The doctor made it clear any patient assigned to the side tent can't be treated.'

They burst inside, "-imbeciles," fired Igna, "-can't you see I'm doing a surgery?" he fiercely glared the lady, "-nurse, have you brought blood or the testing kit, what is it?"

"Who are you?"

"Don't get in his way," fired the vigilante, "-he's the only person who wishes to help the mortal patients. I don't care, help or get out."

"Are you insane, performing surgery here is..."

“Lady, listen to orders, I don’t need this from you. I’ll take personal responsibility for the patients here – now, will you help or get in the way?”

‘Who’s this person?’ left to right, ‘-that’s Igor, I thought he lost his arm and was near death – the latter’s fixed in place, the vital signs are present. Whoever this has real skill, employment of magic, and medical knowledge; Magiology from the South West, “-are you from Hidros?”

“Not the best time to conduct an interview. Go fetch the items I’ve asked for.”

“Alright, I’ll help,” she firmly nodded and ran.

‘The lives are the priority, she understood what I meant. Good, there are competent people around. Might not be such a bad thing after all,’ an empty barrier rose around a makeshift table, the lady with the neck wound slept solemnly, ‘-a cleansing barrier should replace the need for a sterile environment.’

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“Nurse Ada, where are we headed?” they stormed inside the dormitory.

“To the kitchen,” said she, “-we’re storing blood there,” many of the vigilantes immediately got out the way.

“Today’s a rough day for the medics,” commented one.

“I know, they help us all the time, we owe our lives to them.”

“GO FOR IT, NURSE ADA,” cheered a few, “-YOU’RE THE BEST.”

Sweat on her face and pain in her legs, they reached the makeshift blood vault, “-no luck,” she panted, “-it’s empty.”

“Well, let’s get the testing kit instead,” said the vigilante.

“Sure.”

“What’s the commotion about?” inquired Jonl crossing a window to the backyard.

“I’d guess patients from the fight against chains,” said Meza, “-the beast was finally defeated, I wonder who will be awarded the prize?”

“Beats me,” shrugged Apatha, “-I’m more worried about Cardie...”

“They won’t tell us anything,” sighed Meza, “-come on, let’s go have dinner, I’ll pick up the tab,” the gentle light from the outside cast rectangles onto the hallway’s floor, where the light wasn’t needed, darkness awaits. At night, only the cafeteria, dormitories, and backyard were given electricity for the latter be a scarcity in times of crisis. ‘They’ll announce the report in a few hours.’

Down below, tension heightened, “-I’m sorry, the vault is empty,” only a handful of tests laid to the side, “-I should perhaps ask for help from the others?”

“I expected as much,” he dropped his hands and exhaled, the surgical tools were held by an unseen force, “-nurse Ada, I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll connect to the network and get access to the database, here’s my contact information. Take to the inside and bring whoever I name, is that ok?”

“Sure, will you transfuse the blood?”

“Yes,”

“The necessary equipment is being used by another doctor. The reason for this tent is to free items for those who can be saved... I hope reality settles in.”

“There’s no need to worry,” he smiled, “-who said one needs tools to control blood,” moved to another patient, “-I’m counting on you,” and off they were. A gentle touch to the earring, “-I heard and understood, master, worry not, the database holds no secrets,” the information wrote itself across the lens.

‘Fate works in mysterious ways. Bunda, Harlie, and Jonas,’ the message soon transferred to Ada, who aided by Arkle, combed the cafeteria for the trio.

“Bunda,” a pair of cold hands grasped the man from the back.

“Can’t a man take a pee break?” the pants zipped to be pulled outside.

“Come with us...”

“Harlie,” cold fingers held her arms tight.

“Don’t startle me, a lady needs her breaks to keep pretty,” her eyes rolled.

“Come with us...”

“Jonas,” two enigmatic figures loomed in his shadow.

“If it’s money you want, I don’t have any...” a petrified sense of fear crashed against his face.

“Come with us...”

A few minutes later, the trio stood before the tent, “-hello, Harlie and Jonas, didn’t think we’d meet up so quickly.”

“Why you here?” inquired Harlie, “-Nurse Ada sure is on edge today.”

“Maybe because of a lover’s quarrel with the doctor.”

“Shut it,” *smack,* “-Jonas, come in.”

“The tent, did someone we know pass away?” inquired Bunda nonchalantly.

“No,” they dipped inside to a familiar face.

“Oh hell no,” the boys immediately spun on their heels, “-not going to happen.”

“No way out,” grinned Arkle, “-greenhorns need to listen to their elders.”

“Cut the crap, Arkle, you don’t know the devil of a man who stands behind us...”

“We meet again,” said Igna, “-there’s no need to fret,” a parting motion had the three flung onto chairs, *snap,* cheaply made ropes wrapped about their wrist and legs.

“No, no, no,” they struggled, “-I’m not going to take this!”

“Harlie, please,” fired Igna, “-don’t cause a mess; take a look around, they’re fighting life and death, some of them might never see the light of day again,” he paused and stared, Harlie barely looked her age and in a bad way, the information said of eighteen whilst she looked twenty-three. The dyed hair and obnoxiously thick make-up didn’t aid her cause, the body was one robust; a roundish face, rounded nose, and petit eyes, freckles made their mark on her cheeks. Opposite sat Bunda, the leader of the squad, a man who can create any weapons he wishes. Tall, brown, and bearing a somewhat muscular figure, the silvery earrings, light brown hair of which laid shy of the brows, made him quite a man to look at, looks didn’t make a person, the eccentric personality made the circle tight. Jonas, the typically snobbish-looking boy, for his age, looked younger, clean-shaven jaw, grey eyes, and dark hair, the shorter stature gained popularity as a little brother, or puppy, opposed to a young adult of twenty-three years old. From the trio to the lonesome Arkle, hard has he worked meant one thing, either he loved the lady or was overly guilty. Taller than the rest, a sharp nose and a prominent nose bridge, clean-shaven head, and glasses to firm a sense of sharpness.

“It might hurt a little,” said Igna, “-listen, Jonas, your blood matches hers, and from the physical exam records, thee matches the criteria. Will you help in saving another or remain quiet,” said he uncomfortably close.

“I’ll do it, whatever you want,” flash images of the tornado crossed his mind, “-I’ll do it...”

“Good,” *slash,* he slit the wrist, *Blood-Arts: Extria,* a line crystalline blood hovered gently into the barrier, ‘-this will be enough to help in the recovery.’ Once inside, the wound closed, a few potions and scrolls paired with a mana rejuvenation spell forcefully pulled her from death’s gate. Ada wasted no time intending to Jonas’s wound.

“Why have you tied us?” fired Harlie.

“For a simple reason,” the lady hovered to a vacant bed, “-about what happened earlier, the one who defeated Chains was that masked assassin.”

“I see,” nodded Jonas, “-I get it, it was the masked lady who killed the beast, sure, I wish I could have seen. Instead, I was trapped in an inferno, was too busy holding in my gut,” the sarcastic remark garnered laughter from Harlie.

“As a team leader, I proclaim so, Chains was defeated by the lady, are we in agreement?”

“Bunda, drop the accent,” sighed Harlie, “-we get it, boss man, thanks for the help against the wolves.”

The ropes slit on their own, “-go on, take a break for the day,” the tent emptied, “-Nurse Ada and Arkle, same to you. I’ll handle the rest.”

“Quite the persona,” remarked Ada who headed for the cafeteria. Midway, shrouded in shadows, Arkle dropped to his knees and face-planted the roughage of which was dry grass, “-I can’t believe it,” the shoulders and arms shook, “-she’ll live, Ania will live; the squads going to be happy.”

“Get up, it’s been a rough day, take a shower and rest.”

Meanwhile, further away, sat a figure unseen by the masses, ‘-I should drop the stalking habit, got me in a lot of trouble last time,’ it kept to the tree, ‘-maybe I should check on him... or maybe not?’ the tent’s covers parted, light from the inside overpowered the outside where the spotlights were toggled off.

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An hour and a half elapsed, ‘-I’ve treated most of them,’ cigar in mouth, ‘-I need a break.’

‘Why’s he coming this way,’ twirled into the shadow of the trunk, ‘-I’m screwed, I don’t want to be found out.’

Puff...

Chapter 698: True Demonlord [29]

‘Why did he have to casually smoke here out of all places,’ arms to her chest, ‘-my hearts about to explode, I’m warm, my ears are hot, am I this nervous. I mean, I wasn’t in the wrong, not like I was stalking or anything, I was just taking a leisurely stroll, yes, leisurely stroll. I’m a princess of the Alphan royal family, why am I making excuses to myself, its disgraceful. I’m not in the wrong, it’s his fault for being...’ she gulped, ‘-for being what, why is it hard to admit... calm down, steady the pulse, don’t panic, everything’s going to be fine, he hasn’t sensed me yet, the mask’s working.’

Puff, sat on the stone edifice surrounding the tree, “-stop hiding in the shadows.”

Hic, she covered her mouth instantly, ‘-damn it, I hurt my lips...’

“Come on out.”

“Fine, fine,” a few twigs broke under her feet, “-how’d you know I was there?”

“I felt a presence stare ever since we arrived. The stalking habit is unbecoming nobility,” two taps on the empty ledge beside signaled for her to take a seat. “-Don’t the shorts make it a little chilly?”

“Not really,” they peered to the yard, ‘-I can’t feel cold the way I am now.’

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“Suit yourself,” he puffed and offered a cigar, “-want one?”

“Sure,” she accepted.

“Nice, I didn’t know the princess smoked.”

“From time to time,” said she, “-I thought it looked cool – tis far as it goes, I couldn’t bear inhaling the smoke, cigarette stink as well. Cigars, on the other hand, are somewhat bearable.”

“Whatever you say,” he puffed further, “-listen, I need to ask a favor.”

“What sort of favor?” her hair swayed into the coming breeze.

“Take credit for defeating Chains. I’ve already spoken to the rookies.”

“Why I mean, don’t you want the attention?”

“Not really,” he leaned to watch the stars, “-I enjoy a good fight from time to time, depends on the mood. If they knew an alchemist defeated the beast, it would discredit the people who fight daily. We can’t let that happen, the vigilantes are the first and last line of defense. Even if Odegawoan is like a thirty-minute drive away, the secluded area feels like a different world; maybe it’s overthinking, I don’t know.”

“I get what you mean. I feel the same way, the only reason I came was to provide aid. Mother insisted to have guards; day in and day out, they keep on staring. Look to the left, the three are blatantly trying to blend and watch from a distance.”

“Good thing, I’m not opposed to the idea of spying on my children, well, I sort of understand their line of thinking. I’m a father of three myself, they’re a rowdy bunch of eccentric characters. A day’s never boring when they’re around.”

“I didn’t know of this, are you married?”

“No, I had a partner, she was murdered. Tis the extent of my love life,” he pulled one knee to the ledge, “-I don’t think I’m cut out to be anyone’s partner. Honestly, I’d rather have a close group of companions. Well, who am I to say really, my mind changes quickly, take the words with a grain of salt.”

“I see,” she puffed, “-we should head inside. I’ll take credit for the monster-slaying – they’re about to announce today’s report.”

“Go on ahead; patients need treatment. See you soon?”

“Why the intonation?”

“What’s the name, can’t call you a princess or use the real identity...”

“Fia, call me Fia. Thanks for the outfit and cigar, you’re a good guy, big sister was right.”

“Told you,” he winked.

Greetings vigilantes, spoke through the intercoms, *-the highlight of today was Chains defeat at the hands of the Masked Warrior. Per the bounty, 5,000 points will be transferred to the account. No death has been reported, casualties were moderately higher than yesterday, a few were infected and subsequently taken to the Q-zone. We appreciate the hard work; more information will be made available via the main channel. Military supplies and food will arrive next thing tomorrow morning, those assigned with guard duty must be awake at 04:00, enough for today, good night.*

“Hey, that’s the masked warrior,” said whispers.

‘Good thing I changed into my usual outfit. I so wish the guards would cut some slack,’ she passed by a desperate-looking table.

“Don’t stare so much.”

“Come on, Meza, I was only taking a look at the famed warrior...”

“Don’t be rude,” fired Jonl.

“Sorry?” she stopped and stared; “-did you say something?”

“No, no, nothing. My friend here is a little on edge since this morning, I hope you understand...”

“I see, I would be on edge if I were you,” she leaned and nodded to the side, “-the table over’s been gawking the little lady for quite a while. Be on guard,” she continued to the cafeteria lady.

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“She’s awesome.”

“Quiet down, Aptha.

“What’s wrong, Meza?”

“She’s right – the guys from early this morning are up to no good. Jonl, don’t leave her side, no matter the excuse, hear me?”

“You won’t sleep in the room today?” wondered Aptha.

“No, I have to do the thing, you know...”

“Yeah,” sighed Jonl, “-must be rough. Good luck, we’re grateful for everything.”

“Anything for the team.”

Morning rose over Carter Lake, a mixture of colors reflected atop the profound bed of water. The inky dark outlines permeated the scape as if it be a black and white picture. Supple chirps of the wildlife added a touch of niceness to the otherwise eerie situation. Those of means to travel often took to the lake for a morning run; popularity dwindled since bodies were found. Fitness was a great fundamental for those in show business, and thus, aspiring artists often made rounds.

Huff, puff, “-Johnny...”

“Estla, don’t give up, we’re nearly done for the course.”

“...”

“Come on,” he turned seeing her slowed pace, “-Hey, are you giving up?” he jogged over.

“Look,” her hands trembled toward the tree line, “-a b-b-b-b.”

“If you say there’s a body, I’ll be mad. Out of the abundant excuses you made, this one must take the cake.”

“I’m serious...”

“Fine, show me,” he blocked her vision, “-where, maybe it’s a ghost?”

“Shut up...”

“Oh,” the cheery smile dropped, “-right, this is awkward. Someone hung themself...”

“HOW CAN YOU BE SO CALM?”

“Listen, Carter Lake’s a place where bodies are found regularly. You shouldn’t be surprised,” they shuffled to the other side, “-call the police, another body found.”

The ray broke into the claustrophobic tent – a fuzzy hue tenderly shone. One of the bed-sheets ruffled, ‘-someone’s regained consciousness.’

‘The attack...’

“Don’t move too much,” said a deep voice, “-the wounds might have healed; best be on the safe side, no harsh movement.”

“Where am I?”

“At the dormitory yard. Welcome to the land of the living,” an unfamiliar face approached from the back, “-let’s see,” fingers to the forehead, “-yeah, I don’t sense anything bad, you’re completely healed.”

“Completely healed from what?”

“Sure ask a lot of questions first thing in the morning. The wound’s healed without a bruise.”

“No, I wasn’t worried about...”

“Yeah, yeah,” he stepped back, “-sit up straight. The doctor should be here any minute.”

“Are you not the doctor?”

“I’m only an alchemist.”

Early morning back and forth brought life to the prior dead atmosphere, “-are you here?” the covers parted.

“Nurse,” he proclaimed, “-I’m so glad to see you.”

“Not sure what you mean,” she leaned backward suspiciously, her arms moved into a close stance, “-why are you glad?”

“I’ve healed everyone here using Magiology. They should be in fighting form in a few days, I’ve already written the diet for each patient. Please ask for another doctor to take over their recovery; I’ve done my job.”

“I have to ask, from what hospital are you?”

“I’m not a working medic, only a humble practitioner of magic, an Alchemist, I thought we went over this yesterday.”

“-I’m not satisfied by the answers...” Invertedly, Arkle spoke of the new medic who saved his party member from the brink of death. In an argument that went wrong, he challenged a fellow squad leader to a bet, and hence, a crowd of five curious folks stood patiently outside, “-Lord Alchemist, are you there?”

“Arkle,” he exited, “-perfect timing, Ania’s regained consciousness.”

“Really?” he dashed inside.

“Who might you gentlemen be?”

“We’re squadmates of the patients inside,” replied one.

“Yes, no need for a backstory,” returned he impatiently, “-I assure, everyone inside’s been healed and will return to their normal lives. I’ll excuse myself,” he walked a few steps, “-can anyone point to the latrine?”

.....

“Sure.” The mysterious fellow followed the description, meanwhile, the envious bystanders entered one at a time. Those comatose for a while awoke to familiar faces.

‘Can’t be happening,’ stared Ada, ‘-he’s treated ten mortally injured fighters, the way he operated and worked was a marvel in knowledge. I’ve only heard of Magiology. If what he did is a gateway to the future; I can’t imagine the countless lives we could save...’

“You have your arm back,” jested one.

“I thought I was going to die...”

After the break, ‘-the cafeteria sure is a popular spot. What’s on the menu?’ a line formed naturally, the meals were bland at best, rationed to suit the daily nutritional value of a person, ‘-what’s the point...’ another line formed to the side with a different cashier. The menu was different and so was the price, one side used points, the other used money. ‘Seriously, 60 Exa for a drink’s rather pricey...’

“Good morning.”

“Yeah, good morning. I’ll have the breakfast combo.”

“Breakfast combo for 160 Exa, anything else?”

“No thanks.”

The aura shifted, those next queue over watched jealously, ‘-what’s wrong with them, the food’s pricey but still.’

“Here sir,” said the lady, “-one more thing,” she whispered, “-be careful, the vigilantes don’t view those who spent money on meals lightly. Tis an unwritten rule, money is far more valuable to be spent on meals.”

“What kind of rule is that?” he laughed, “-sure, I’ll take it to heart.”

“Another rich kid,” went about the tables.

“He ordered the combo, man, I’d kill to eat some real food.”

‘There, a free table,’ he sat and ate. Petrified expression went about the other tables.

“Hey man,” hailed a neighbor, “-that spot is reserved, take my advice, change seats before they arrive.”

“Oh, a little too late for that,” said a rougher voice, “-listen there,” he slammed the table, “-I don’t mind you sitting, however, you got to pay us by the second; how about 100 Exa per tick?” He nonchalantly ate, the words fell on empty ears.

“I had a nightmare,” more people arrived.

“Meza, look,” called Jonl, “-it’s that guy from yesterday.”

“Oh hell no,” fired Aptha, her light feet sprinted across the room, “-aren’t you guys bored of bullying others?”

“If it’s not miss jailbait; long time no see.”

“Stop bullying other people,” she gritted.

“Listen here short stack,” said another, “-this doesn’t involve you.”

“You bet it does,” she stood proudly.

“Noisy,” the tray slid, “-what was it, 100 Exa per second. Were you keeping time?”

“No,” returned the big fellow, “-I’m not a stopwatch.”

“Whatever, uncultured ruffians,” a pile of 1000 Exa bills summoned atop his hand, “-there,” it flung onto the man’s face and scattered, “-there’s around 30,000 Exa, consider this table bought. I’d prefer not to get involved to the scum of society,” a smug once over, “-thank you for stepping in, Aptha,” he held out a hand, “-let me treat you to breakfast.”

“Sorry, sorry,” Jonl rushed over, “-Aptha can’t keep her mouth shut...”

“Her words were melody to my ears,” beamed Igna, “-don’t take it the wrong way,” he moved to the empty counter, “-scum will remain scum, best not to get involved. Ignore them, besides,” he snickered, “-they’ve never seen a 1000 Exa bill before.”

“Neither have I,” shrugged Aptha.

“Nor me,” yelled a bystander, the situation seemed comical.

“Oh, I apologize,” the hall echoed in laughter.

“Nah, it’s good,” said a distant voice, “-shove it to them, those mongrels, always ruining the mood during mealtime, we’re sick of it.”

Chapter 699: True Demonlord [30]

A visible air of power and confidence ambled into sight. The cacophonous laughter brought about by one accepting the demands of ruffians turned to silence. There she stood, making her way towards the ‘bought’ table. Laughter and undermining comments bombarded the ‘hoodlums’ labeled so by the many victims.

“Don’t look down on us,” said a muffle. Bloodshot eyes lifted towards Igna and Aptha, who smiled at the prospect of real food, “-there are going to pay...” the fist clenched.

"I wouldn't touch him if I were you," said whisper, "-squad 30, you've caused much hassle over the months. If you wish not to incur my wrath, better keep your wits about, though I expect lesser from blockheads. If violence is the only way to make thee understand, I'll gladly take your arms in exchange for my troubles, have I made myself clear?"

Tsk, "-whatever,* *clash,* the table toppled by a sudden kick, "-watch your back, assassin."

Humph, crossed armed and conniving, "-trash is gone."

"The masked warrior saves the day!" cheered the many guests.

"Hell yeah!" said they very energetically. A good start to the day means a whole world of difference. After the table reset, the masked lady ambled to the counter, "-good morning."

.....

"Good morning, Fia," said Igna, "-here, a coffee as thanks."

"Are you sure about buying us meals?" paused Jonl.

"I hoped I didn't have to hear so from a fellow countryman. Think nothing of it, money comes and goes; what you make of it is what dictates its worth. Look now," he carried the tray onto the table, "-the supposed ruffians were shunned and exiled into shame. They'll come to harm soon, be on guard."

"What about the money you threw?"

"Oh, a mere illusion spell," he chuckled, "-no way I'll waste money on such idiots. What they picked were fragments of my notebook," to which the torn object laid atop the table, "-Aptha sure has a mouth on her, doesn't she."

"Hold it," interjected Fia, "-phrasing, work on it."

"Why?"

"I get what she means," chuckled Meza, "-out of context, it might be viewed with much scrutiny."

"Oh, you people have dirtied minds," he took a sip, "-anyway, if ever there's trouble, come to Q5 Zone 3, I've set up shop. Medical supplies should be on their way."

"We barely make ends meet to afford food," said Jonl, "-no way we'll be able to afford such luxury."

"Don't worry, the supplies aren't for sale. Tis for an emergency – yesterday night was tedious, part of me feels there are more to come. Be careful out there."

"Y-yeah..." murmured Aptha, "-we're suspended at the moment."

"I see," he took another sip, "-Meza must have disobeyed orders..."

"How do you concur?"

"I'm a mind reader,"

"Really?"

“No, I’m joking. No matter the reason, I’ll be there.”

The filled tables scattered into the vague distance; a rough day laid ahead – a telltale sign from gear and agitated expressions. “-I should get going as well,” said Igna, “-treat me once the whole ordeal of war is over.”

“Wait up,” hailed Fia, “-let me come with.” The slower-paced masked warrior had spurts to match Igna’s step to which he courteously slowed and matched hers.

“A gentleman,” said Meza, “-anyway, Jonl,” the face fortified, “-our expedition ban will be lifted soon. Get the gear ready, we’ll be assigned to Q3 Zone 3.”

“They blatantly want us to die,” muttered Apha, “-the front line is a pain for me...”

“I know the ability strains heavy on the stamina, still, we need you.”

“Never said I wouldn’t help,” the table grew distant. Many present earlier nodded at Igna, the impression was of a man who didn’t take disrespect, someone who’d make one feel utmost shame and embarrassment. Granted throwing money wasn’t the best idea, the latter was soon revealed to be paper – thus grew the repute.

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“What about not drawing attention?”

“Fia, Fia,” they arrived at the yard, “-what happened earlier was rather fun. You didn’t get to see their faces,” he smirked. Squad 30 bore murderous gaze on the way to the front lines, “-there they go,” he smugly waved.

‘You’re dead,’ motioned they with a cutting neck gesture.

‘Say it again when you return home,’ he winked.

“Why provoke them?”

“For fun?” he made for the tent. Many of the patients scattered about in the company of their various squads. A miracle has been performed, a direct quote from a squad leader.

“Lady Fia we must leave for the front line. Orders have come to watch the enemy’s movement.”

“We part here.”

“May the goddess of battle guide thee well.”

‘Now then,’ the covers parted, ‘-where did I keep the flask of mana?’

“Looking for this?”

“Ada?” she sat cross-legged atop a bed, “-might I have the flask back?”

“No,” she stood, “-follow me first.” The scenery soon swapped for one confined and suffocating. Practitioners sat about a rectangular table, at the center, the head doctor, Miles G’Leon, a tall figure of

sharp facial features, clean-shaven jaw, short cut hair of which began to turn grey. Dark circles under the eyes formed an expression of dread; zombie-like to some extent.

“Have you brought him?” said one in the shadow of a corner.

“Yes,” she replied, “-here is Igna Haggard, the Alchemist.”

“Alchemist, I’ve never heard the title this far into the East. Tell me, what’s the purpose of coming here?” wondered G’Leon in a skeptical intonation.

“To research the monster plague. Honestly speaking, the triage is rather crude. Here I thought priority to be those of mortal injured and not the other way around. Is it common practice to yield on those who cannot fight?”

“Right to the point,” said one sat to G’Leon’s right, “-answer our questions first.”

“What would said purpose be. Tell me, Doctor G’Leon, shouldn’t a medical professional put the life of others first?”

“Yes.”

“There lays my answer, I did what any medic would, I healed the patients you chose to give up on.”

“No, no, you misunderstand,” he forced a grin, “-I’m ecstatic, my expressions might be dull and bland, however, my heart beats furiously. I’ve never seen such a way of treating patients – Ada told us everything about it. Using magic to heal, a machine less blood-transfusion, tell me, how effective are the treatment methods?”

“Depends on the person’s inner mana reserves. What I used is the manipulation of mana, heal the spirit and the body follows. Then again, if the body isn’t in shape, the spirit can’t activate the natural rejuvenation process. The body heals itself so to speak.”

“I don’t believe it,” fired a lady left of G’Leon, “-magic is a defunct way of life. Most of Alpha are oblivious to the practice and I’d wager most of the world too. What will bringing an ancient way of treatment do to advance our medical science. Miles, there’s no way we can learn what he has accomplished – the patients outside don’t lie about his skills.”

“The lady is right, what I performed, and sorry if it comes across arrogant, can’t be replicated. My uncle spent his life delving into the true nature of Mana, and after his passing, I took on the research to further the art.”

“Who is this uncle of yours?”

“The Founder of Magiology, ex-King of Arda, leader of the Federation, Staxius Haggard.”

“A mouthful,” came a sigh.

“The most enigmatic leader of our time. I do apologize for the less than amicable reception. Curiosity got the better of us. Will you join the hospice?”

“No,” the head shook, “-I only treated the patients on a passing fancy. Remember, I’m not a Doctor, I’m a Scholar, my face rather be inside books as opposed to the innards.”

“What about the speech of life comes first?”

“Those are thy obligations, not mine. Worry not, I’m in process of remodeling a few buildings to make a secondary hospice for the study of the curse. Nurse Ada should have the contact information. I’ll treat those who wish for help, nothing more, nothing less,” the talk ended.

Early morning shifted to 10:00, supplies arrived in helicopters. Monster activity in Zone 4 and 3 heightened. Fia’s squad took to the street and decimated stragglers effortlessly. Meza and the bunch returned to the front lines, an unguarded command scouting post became a makeshift base of operation. Explosions rattled the floor, desks, and chairs were dropped on the stairway. Meza sat before a broken window next to a shabby table, on it was a radio and a holographic display.

The tail of an unknown beast dipped for an armored patrol, *bam,* the vehicle exploded right under his nose. Plenty more of those tails scattered into countless explosions, “-Jonl, status?”

“A new monster,” said he laid atop the same building’s roof, “-it’s been marked.”

“Understood,” the information relayed to artillery deeper into the debris.

“Influx of patients,” cried Aptha, “-Five dead in the assault. I’ll treat the others best as I can, what are the orders?”

“Stand ground, Aptha, if enemies approach-* static interrupted the communication, “-Aptha, Aptha?”

“D-de, t-tur, -bies.”

‘I didn’t miss this place,’ he dashed for the back, “-Squad 32, join with Squad 33 and make for the base.”

Gunfire raged towards Aptha’s general location, “-Incoming horde of Jelly beasts!” slimy creatures of fast mobility, they once exterminated five squads in a matter of seconds.

“Artillery unit on standby.”

‘We don’t have men power,’ the mind dropped into lightning-fast thoughts, ‘-Aptha’s position’s been compromised. I made sure to have three guys on standby; they must have broken the transmitter. Protection of the Zone 3’s gate comes first, we can’t afford casualties, “-Squad 32, and 33, eliminate the threat, if possible, priority is the recovery of our medics, without them this operation is doomed.”

“Understood,” fired across.

“JONL!”

“I got you,” he smiled, “-nobody’s passing through,” two shots, ‘-Arise,’ an electrically charged gate materialized inches from the J-beasts.

‘Always right on time,’ coordinates transmitted to the firing unit. Soon after, heavy objects plummeted over yonder, shock-waves crashed against the dirtied outer walls.

“Engineering unit, mission’s accomplished – the gate’s ready for operation.”

“Squads without orders, spread out and clean the area, Q3 Zone 3 has been cleaned,” sweat-drenched his face, ‘-after so many sacrifices, we’ve finally conquered the area.’

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“Squad 32 reporting,” they entered a land charred remains of an eatery, “-no survivors in sight.”

“-what about the healers?”

“Squad 33, we’ve located heavily injured members. Requesting evacuation for the fallen.”

“-H-hello, M-Meza,” the private squad channel lit, “-we were ambushed by the turned. I managed to escape, one of the guards activated the self-destruct sequence to save us.”

‘Seriously,’ he fell to the floor, ‘-at what costs...’

“WARNING, Fog has been spotted at Zone 4,” helplessness washed over his face, Jonl rose to one knee and dropped his shoulder – those able to escape rejoined at the pickup zone.

“Orders to all members, the Fog’s settled. There are five minutes until they reach us, everyone, evacuate. Guardians of Gate 3, be ready to shut the gates.” Battered trucks, clawed and beaten, arrived.

Over to Q5 Zone 3, ‘-and done,’ the adjacent building merged into the first building as an extended wing, ‘-this should suffice as a sleeping area.’

“Master, the battle has grown very hectic, casualties are in the dozen, 5 have been confirmed dead.”

“I see,” he climbed to the changed upstairs, “-relay the information to the princess. I’ll get started on the monster curse. Any other news?”

“Lady Jula adamantly tried to phone earlier. She said the body of a certain man was found hung in Carter Lake.”

“D’Loa?”

“Yes, the conjecture was correct. The Patek’s have shone themselves”

“What about 02 and the spy from the Blood-king’s faction?”

“I’ve pinged them constantly, no response so far, they might have been found out and killed.”

“Keep trying. What’s the new addition up to?”

“Starix’s taken to the street for the recapture of Stanley’s Homage. Money made from the den’s been easier to launder with aid from the Chief. She’s asked for a little cut, how should I reply?”

“Give her the money, can’t pass on an easy bargaining chip.”

Chapter 700: True Demonlord [31]

“Mist Flyers,” rang about the channel, “-the monsters are here. What are the next orders, Meza?”

“Evacuate,” proclaimed he loudly, “-we mustn’t fight this battle.” Blinding red lights flared atop the gates and spun with beeps to mark the shutting of gates. With barely time left, Meza and Jonl slid under the metal sheet. Dust in the mouth and pebbles against the cheeks, they stood to a completely devastated first aid. Those of the healing ability ran about checking on others. Earlier, after the injured were taken for aid, they turned and attacked, a brave fighter of squad 28, stood ground, used an ability

to imprison the monsters, and self-destructed. Survivors sat underneath a feeble shelter; a cough would crumble the roof.

"Here," a bottle came into sight, "-drink up, you must have been through a lot."

"Water," she cared none for who gave and gulped, *cough, cough.*

"-Easy," he went about and tapped her back, "-slowly, drink slowly, you're still recuperating."

"I'm beat," she rose her legs and head, "-I want to sleep, my body feels like a mess."

"Good on surviving."

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"Well, I do admit my survival rate is greater."

"I'll check on the others," voiced Meza. A standalone ex-tavern stood opposite the shelter, a push of the door, and many tired yet content individuals sat and spoke. Without much effort, a few steps led to an empty table. There, the squad leaders took notice and came for a chat. Squad 28, 32, and 33, sadly, 28 had but one member, and tis the leader who remained on standby.

"What's the next mission?" inquired the leader of 33.

"Don't gloss by my squad's death," fired the leader of 28.

"Come on, Uonl, we spoke about this earlier. Meza isn't responsible for their deaths; we hold the blame too – the attack was so rapid I couldn't react."

"The long-range beast took us off guard, it decimated an armored unit. Any ideas on the death count?"

"Three from Squad 28 and two from the armored unit, today's one of the worse."

"I ought to ask," voiced leader of 32, "-where did the orders come from?"

"The manager," said he, "-today is split into two-sector, one for supply and one for the fortification of the gate. I'm telling you, tis a complete mess. We barely had enough manpower to do on an expedition much less..."

Warning: Boss Class Monster – Antronla has been spotted. Fighters are hereby ordered to exterminate the beast, orders from the manager, vigilantes are obligated to exterminate the Boss.

'Not now...'

"Hello gentleman," the doors swiftly opened, "-might I inquire to where Meza is?"

"The uniforms," whispered a few, "-the military..."

"Over here," he said.

"Glad to see you're well," the sternly dressed man stormed to the table, "-not much luck to be unbanned at this moment. I digress, there are greater matters to attend. I've been ordered to take command of Q3 Zone 3's leadership until the boss is defeated. Worry not, the military has taken refuge along the walls, they're ready to open fire."

“Why come to me?”

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“You’re the de facto leader,” said he, “-no need to be humble, the squads know your leadership qualities. It’s been firm first hand in the field of battle. I’ll stop the pointless drive! Present Squads, take these,” he slid earpieces, “-we’ll be one in the field of battle. Meza, you’re to stay by my side. Jonl is to join Squad 33 and Apatha the vanguard, she’ll be in charge of taking point and healing the fighters.”

“I must contest,” he refuted, “-Apatha’s not in fighting shape, she won’t last a moment on the front lines.”

“-and?” returned an emotionless stare, “-soldiers are expendable, I care not for the loss of a little girl. Squad 33, gather the forces and await further orders. Meza, tis best you not disobey,” a disgruntled expression loomed in each step.

‘The military has no business here....’ Few rounds about the premises and the gates were readied to be open, in a twist of fate, the monster began a slow approach. Transport waited, Apatha, barely able to stand on her own, stood with a heavy backpack and heavily loaded rifle, “-will you be ok?” asked another in the medic squad.

“I think so, don’t worry about me,” they vaulted into the horseman to hell. Mist spread outwards, distance red-glared, a chilling breeze, the engine toggled.

“Listen up people, fight with all your might, there’s no need to hold back. We’re going to take down this monster, trust me, the military has your back,” the operation began.

‘Something doesn’t add up, why is the military involved, shouldn’t they be preoccupied with the northern province. Supply mission, unbanned...’

Grr they sped past obnoxiously lingering presences, *bite* unbeknownst to all, a humble healer had the head cleanly taken off. Blood smeared across her visage, the horror forced silence, “-drop to the floor,” cried another. Devourers, monsters of tiny humanoid stature and massive heads leaped side to side, their only target, the head, a single bite and one would be beheaded. ‘-am I going to die?’ went across the mind.

The transports went full speed; any in the way were blown to the side, the remainder rejoined with the medics and opened fire, “-we’ll cover, focus on driving to the location.”

Out the mud and into the dirt, the fog lessened at the price of another giant. A completely skeletonized body, no innards nor weak spots, a shiny chrome-like substance coated its bones, over which was draped by a bullet-filled robe.

‘Reports says Antronla is the perfect weapon of destruction, no visible weakness, immunity to just about anything. Its slow attacks are easy to manage until it summons an ethereal bow, there, the battle is lost, rapid rate of shots and unbeatable accuracy. Why’s the military invested?’

“Split,” said the squad leader, “-we’ll surround and launch our best attacks. Medics, hang back, for now, support when needed, rearguard, try and keep the other monsters at bay, if there’s a break in

formation, split accordingly. Listen, people, this mission isn't worth our deaths, I'd rather have a beer; any who dies without blood on their weapon will incur my silver rod.'

"UNDERSTOOD!"

"Jump out people," it slid to a stop. Strong abilities went on the offensive. A pool of lava conjured underneath the boss who stumbled. Hefty objects dropped, those armed with superhuman abilities leaped straight for its face and punched, each impact would somewhat shake the beast, '-shit,' cried one, "-the skull's too strong."

"Try the legs instead," and off she leaped. The rear guard kept a smile, devourers came in full force – the moment they crossed out the fog, a bullet exploded their skull from the wall.

"Good shooting there, son," complimented one in a military outfit.

"Why aren't you providing covering fire?"

"No reason, we can't afford to waste ammunition here boy. Our goal is to neutralize Antronla and not save weaklings. Best not disobey orders," he pointed to the side, "-else you'll be tied up."

'Corrupt bastards,' he gritted, '-Squad 33 tried to rebel in vain, they had sharpshooters ready to take heads if needed.'

Similar to the start of a run, the first few couples of meters are easy and fun. Admiring the sights, controlled breaths, a good sensation until the long-lasting pain shoots down, the blaring heat, the rough asphalt, pants, and tired legs. Refusal to fight a battle of attrition against bosses heavily impacted five minutes in, "-WATCH OUT," stone spikes summoned to impaled part of the rearguard, "-HEALERS!" cried an unfortunate survivor. "-Wait..." the earpiece didn't function, heavily red eyes remained shy of the shadows, "-child, strayed and abandoned, watch as your team dies, sufferance is what we feed upon, the servant has yet to wake. Now, those dead, be one and kill thy own kind," the stone stained with blood. The dead reawakened, "-I don't w-w-want t-to d-die..." *slash*

"Fall back," cried squad leader of 32, "-wait," he leaped to safety, "-why's no one responding... hello, ANGELA, DON'T!"

'Huh?' she turned midway through her jump; '-did I hear my name?' *BOOM* an arrow released point-blank, tearing a hole through her stomach, the life wasted off her face. '-It choose to switch now?' a glance to the left showed turned mauling their comrades – the healers barely kept pace, people fell left and right, monsters came from the woodworks, '-they laid an ambush... they have intelligence?'

"We're losing men at a rapid pace!" exclaimed Meza, "-why's the military not helping?"

"Foolish Meza, have you not realized what this is?"

"..."

"Let me spell it out, the only reason we're here is to cull the vigilantes. Supplies are weak as is, luckily, I've assigned the more competent people into Squad 33, those on the battlefield will be left for dead. Also, the boss class monster would make a great military asset. There's a point in fighting your heritage, son of general Valentino, a genius strategist. I can't believe you didn't figure out our plans."

"I knew it," he dashed for the command center, "-if you want them to die, then, I'll prove thee wrong."

"Hello, Meza speaking, anyone there?"

"No use," laughed the officer, "-the earpieces were faulty; the easiest way to win a war is information, we won the moment they wore the pieces. Guess what, the blame's going to lie on you; thus, the general will swoop to save his long rebellion son. A touching story, don't you think?"

Bang, bang, bang, "-military or not," gritted Jonl, "-I won't stand by and watch my friends die."

"Kill the bastard!"

"No use, sire, we've been immobilized."

'Why did I jump off without a plan,' *woosh,* he fired a grapple crossbow and made for the command center, *CRASH,* the window exploded, "-wake your ass up, Meza."

"What are you doing here," cried the officer, "-vigilantes are nothing more than pawns," he grabbed his collar, "-stand down or else."

"This is why I hate Alphian politics," *bang,* "-the sharpshooters were barely able to scratch. We might have no name, still, there's a shared sense of loyalty," he barged the door, "-come on Meza," quick to jump into a military-grade vehicle, "-we're going to help them."

The walls opened, guardians winked and wished good luck, Squad 33's members escaped landing atop the transport, "-glad you could make it," they entered through the roof, "-can't believe they have such luxurious tanks to carry them around."

"Not technically a tank, whatever," shrugged Jonl, "-sorry about my outburst; I can't break my promise as a friend."

"We understand," said the squad leader, "-nothing pisses me more than conniving higherups."

"Meza, why you quiet?"

"Are you people insane?" the head buried in his hands, "-any idea what will happen to us after we return, if we return?"

"Drop the worrying, Meza. We're going to help comrades, what's wrong with that. Even if we're killed, I'd rather do so in saving another. We counting on you to guide us."

"Idiots," he pulled a remote command center, "-there's already been a lot of casualties, most have been turned, the survivors seem to be the medics."

"Stay away!" cried another, "-don't come any closer." Stones telepathically flung for the monsters, "-DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!"

"I'm sorry," sat Aptha, "-dead, they're all dead..."

"APTHA, HELP ME!" a tears riddled visage spun in desperation, *Crunch,* it tore off her throat and slammed her body to the ground, "-H-help m-m-me..." they bit, tore, chewed, and spat.

Heatwave, a pulse of energy blew aside the beasts, "-Aptha, come on," held by the neck, "-GO IN."

"Uonl?" she mumbled in a dazed state.

"Alright you two, seal up the doors and windows," others stormed in.

"Understood," metal sheets summoned on either side, "-done," they panted.

"I'm glad I met you brothers," he puffed, "-let's head further in, standing here is death," various barriers rose on the ascension to the first floor, "-finally," they dropped, the room froze in a hardened material, "-tired," exclaimed one.

"Uonl... the rearguard."

"Has been wiped out, yes, I know," focused on the outside, "-Angela was killed before my eyes," guilt forced a bite of the inner lips, blood dripped, "-if only the earpieces worked, I could have saved her," the expression tensed.